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# Process as product: the culture of development and the twenty-first century American dramatist

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PROCESS AS PRODUCT:  
THE CULTURE OF DEVELOPMENT AND THE  
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICAN DRAMATIST

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Theatre

by  
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## ABSTRACT

Simply stated, my research and my experiences as a playwright have led me to believe that the present condition of the playwright is that of a relic: that is, because of the notion that all plays need a developmental workshop, playwrights have not only lost authority over their art, but have also been driven to write plays meant for staged-readings rather than production. I argue that playwrights who create self-producing companies not only reclaim confidence in their craft, but also learn how to engage with the larger community via the collaborative process theatre.

In this dissertation, I employ a theoretical lens that relies on Ric Knowles's "material semiotics," while suggesting that the "do-it-yourself" playwright is incorporating just a "touch of anarchy" by reclaiming his or her authorial voice (that is, the playwright is not looking to destroy the American theatre production apparatus; rather, he or she is seeking out his or her own definition of success, which may include acceptance from the status quo). I highlight the causes of the playwright's diminished role in American theatre via a genealogy of the workshop model, and then offer four case studies in which a playwright (or playwrights) have taken control of his (her, or their) art (the New York Writers' Bloc, 13P, Sanctuary: Playwrights Theatre, and Axial Theatre). I suggest that playwrights who build their own writer-driven workshops and their own production companies have given new life to the craft, by bringing theatricality to the fore. I also look at the economics behind new play development and production in America, and suggest that the "do-it-yourself" model frees the writer/producer from the economic (and therefore, ideological) stresses of regional theatre, while fulfilling regional theatre's forgotten mission of incorporating the community into the world of theatre (i.e., development and production).

I close with some considerations of the limitations of the "do-it-yourself" model (such as the notion of vanity/web publications). I then reassert the argument that a playwright not only



has the responsibility to create work for the stage, but also must be a central figure in local community building.

## CHAPTER ONE DO-IT-YOURSELF

In the '30s, Harold Clurman, that great inspirer and co-founder of the Group Theatre, was introduced to André Gide, novelist and Nobel laureate. "The problem with the theatre," Gide remarked, "is to find good plays." "The problem with the theatre," Clurman rejoined, "is to create a Theatre."

– from Todd London's article, "The Shape of Theatre to Come" in *American Theatre Magazine*, November 2002.

In the summer of 2010, I finally gained a production of my play *Liner Notes* as part of an Off-Off Broadway festival. I began writing the play in 2001, while an M.F.A student in playwriting at the Actors Studio Drama School at New School University. The play moved through three classes--one led by Jeffrey Sweet, one by Neal Bell, and one workshop class (the Playwrights/Directors Unit) led by Jack Gelber. Having crafted a draft that met my satisfaction, I began shopping the piece around theatre companies in New York. I should be clear that, like most playwrights, I see a script as a "blue print" for production or a "code-book" for human behavior. Any script, I believe, can change (and change for the better) during a workshop and rehearsal process. A writer can learn a great deal in a workshop that is geared for production, in terms of what moments work, where a scene might be overwritten (that old adage of "show don't tell" haunts me to this day), and where the actors, directors, and designers can create their own stories within the groundwork that the writer has laid. However, a script ultimately needs a production, and a workshop reading (sometimes referred to as a "workshop production"), despite the intentions of the companies that create developmental programs, is a disappointing surrogate.

My script was a semi-finalist for the Abingdon Theatre's Christopher Brian Polk Award in 2004, and, after being workshopped and rewritten in three classes at the ASDS (as stated), it

received workshops with the Actors Studio, the New School for Drama's Alumni Play Project, Epic Rep. Theatre at the Players Club, the 3 States Theatre Company, and underwent three open-to-the-public readings. The script was finally produced by the (re:)Directions Theatre Co. as part of the Planet Connections Theatre Festivity. It had taken *nine* years to land a production.

This example should sound familiar to playwrights. Dan O'Brien, whose play *The Cherry Sisters Revisited* was recently produced with the Humana Festival, told me that his play had been through a number of workshops in five years, with Yaddo (a writer's retreat), Primary Stages, the Irish Repertory Company, The Actors Company Theatre, Stage 13, Perry-Mansfield at Steamboat Springs, and then with the Actors Theatre of Louisville, which had conducted a workshop of the play at Louisiana State University prior to moving to production (O'Brien Email). The play had been through seven workshops in five years.

O'Brien and I are lucky: our works have actually been produced. However, looking over the various biographies of contributors to *The Dramatist: The Journal for the Dramatists Guild of America, Inc.*, one sees that a playwright is likely to boast more readings, residencies and awards (the awards, by the way, are usually staged-readings) than full productions. Indeed, over the years a number of "workshops" have appeared with the aim of helping or guiding a playwright, such as the O'Neill Conference and The Playwrights Center in Minneapolis; even theatres that generally produce, such as New York's Playwrights Horizons on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, have started offering readings rather than committing to productions of new works. Readings such as the ones at Playwrights Horizons, and in not-for-profit theatres across America, are well and good as a step in the process, but where is the production?

As production opportunities have diminished, opportunities for development (with the possibility of staged-readings) have been on the rise. The suggestion is that a work is not ready

for one of the few coveted slots until it has been through a series of public staged-readings, or worse, that a work will simply never be ready to meet the demands of production. The playwright has lost the trust (financial or otherwise) of the theatre world. What kind of function does the playwright serve if he or she ultimately needs so much help? Is the playwright still viable to the theatre? Or is the playwright a relic, an aspect and example of what Jonathan Alter identified as “old culture,” as the new “cultural elite has become less intellectually elite – and much more connected to commerce” (Qtd. in. Boney 11)? Philip Auslander agrees with this point, arguing that the various media (film, television, etc.) that have emerged during the twentieth century can be seen a replacement of theatre-as-American-culture, and live performance practices only survive as long as they are masked in a “mystique” created by practitioners and scholars who live in an “anxiety,” a result of a desperate attempt to keep live performance in a digital age (9).

Live media is not the only reason why the playwright may be considered a piece of old culture. Indeed, the new play development industry has itself become self-replicating. That is, similar workshop models have spread, plays are coded in similar ways, and, therefore, plays have lost their elements of theatricality and originality. In “Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development,” Douglas Anderson conducts an exhaustive history of new play development in the U.S., from the decentralization of the theatre, through the creation of the O’Neill Playwrights Conference, right into the financial crumbling of Off-Broadway in the late 1980s. In his conclusion, Anderson laments:

I began this study fully prepared to scream about the scandalous lack of opportunity and financial support for new work. I was quickly disabused. What the industry lacks isn't opportunity; it is taste, intelligence, and vision. It doesn't lack funding, but appropriate management of its re-sources. There's no dearth of talented writers. But we've institutionalized some damaging developmental

formuli, placing the creative process in predictable, uncreative environments.  
(82)

The predictable, uncreative environment has become home for the American playwright. How is this environment created? Is there a figure in the apparatus of theatre production (or development) that can be blamed? For some, the answer is the literary manager, who often doubles as a dramaturge. Indeed, there is a divide between the playwright and literary manager, and they tend to blame one another for the current *ennui* in American dramatic literature: playwrights are quick to point to the timidity of theatre companies who no longer wish to take financial risk; and literary managers blame playwrights, who no longer know how to write, thereby justifying both the needs of developmental programs and the lack of production. As Todd London argues in the not-so-subtly titled article, “The Shape of Plays to Come”:

This exchange adumbrates a great divide in visions for the future: those who feel the American theatre suffers from lack of great, or even worthy, plays, and those who lay blame for a failing art at the feet of artistically deficient theatres. On one side sit, mostly, artistic directors and producers; on the other, writers, as well as a constellation of other independent artists. (London)

This analysis indicates a much larger issue in the American theatre: it is not one of blame, but rather the acknowledgement that there is a problem: American theatre has become “deficient.” In this respect, new play development indicates a kind of general malaise within the structure of American theatre; or worse, it could indicate that the American theatre itself is moving closer and closer to obscurity, as the American cultural mindset may hold that theatre is no longer relevant, important, or even entertaining.

There are other approaches to the situation that seem, at first blush, somewhat more optimistic. David Dower’s study, “Gates of Opportunity,” was sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s New Play Initiative (and is often referred to as the “Mellon White Pages” by playwrights). In this study, edited by Ben Pesner (who co-authored *Outrageous Fortune: The*

*Life and Times of the New American Play* with Todd London and Zannie Giraud Voss), Dower suggests that part of the issue with new play development is located in the rhetorical landscape of development, and how that operates vis-à-vis funding. Having visited organizations around the country, Dower observes:

A sense of “gaming the language or “spin” pervades the field [of new play development]. A concerted effort to apply specific meanings and values to words like “artist-focused,” “emerging,” “workshop,” “residency,” “development,” and others could be of great service to the artists and organizations working in this sector. At the same time, some of these words are of high value to funders, boards, and critics, tempting every organization to claim that they are to some extent “an *artist-focused organization developing new works by emerging artists of culturally diverse backgrounds.*” (Dower)

While the bulk of Dower’s report seems optimistic insofar as funding opportunities exist for organizations developing (not necessarily producing) new work, the problem lies within the use of capitalist rhetoric to justify art. In other words, the phrase “culturally diverse backgrounds” should be evaluated when it is foregrounded as a means of justifying capital expense – to what extent does this rhetoric indicate a kind of lip-service to diversity? According to the findings published in *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*, organizations that develop the works of “culturally diverse” people tend to still produce white men (67-73). Put another way, white men still earn productions, while the “other” (ethnically different from white, women, transgendered, etc.) earns the grants, insofar as they have an “emerging” status.

Furthermore, Dower argues throughout his study, organizations that are spending money on new play development are missing the point by not producing new works. However, the funding for organizations is directly tied to how many works the company in question can boast it has presented, not necessarily produced, and the number of culturally diverse artists it has helped in the process of emerging. (In chapter four, I will highlight other economic considerations in regards to new play production). Dower finds that the money tends to be

distributed to organizations that are the most visible, a situation which, for me, begs the question- is a playwright only of value (in the largest sense of the word) if he or she has a reading with one of these organizations (5)? What of smaller, local organizations across the country that are not directly tied to the League of Resident [Regional] Theatres? These are questions that will guide the bulk of this study.

The funding situation, tied with readings-sans-production, suggests a somewhat hopeless scenario for playwrights wishing to earn production. Also, as playwrights need to operate under the definitions of “emerging” or “culturally diverse” in order to gain a reading (never mind a production), the scenario seems somewhat bleak. This is not to say that production is the only means by which a playwright can feel a sense of artistic worth, as, I will suggest, there are workshops in which the playwright-as-artist can achieve confidence, without satisfying the funding requirements of a larger organization (which, as a byproduct of development, would be encouraging; as the ends for development, the playwright’s function is given a kind of lip-service for these grant requirements). However, it is my experience that the best playwright-centered workshops that operate without a production apparatus still gear the playwright to *think* towards production, a point I shall return to in chapter three.

If it is true that the playwright function in the late twentieth and early twenty-first-centuries operates in the name of attracting/satisfying grants for theatre companies, then there are much larger issues that need to be taken into account: how do the economics of new play development and new play production shape aesthetic values within the American theatre? Should there even be a notion of aesthetic value, as the United States still operates without a national theatre? If so, can the aesthetic be one of plurality, meaning, different cast sizes, set needs, aesthetic/narrative/non-narrative frameworks for the written and performed drama? And if

the possibility exists for a plurality of aesthetic considerations, a plurality of voices, where can one locate said plurality of aesthetics in the current American theatre?

I want to highlight an alternative model for the playwright, one which reclaims the authorial voice and which champions notions of theatricality. In the summer of 2004, I wrote an adaptation of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the popular Sherlock Holmes story written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. My play, *Hound*, was not a “straightforward” adaptation. Rather, I used Doyle’s story to explore notions of life-after-death, as Watson, a grieving widower, struggles to find evidence of the afterlife in the hopes of being reunited with his dead wife. The play went through several workshops, and was regularly rejected by theatre companies, either for taboo themes (molestation, brother-sister incest), or for its large cast (a minimum of ten actors). In 2007, I produced the play myself, with my wife directing, at *Cité des Arts* in Lafayette, Louisiana. *Cité* is a small arts center, with two performance spaces. The show was financially successful, and artistically fulfilling. Two years later, I co-produced the play for an Off-Off Broadway production, with director/choreographer/downtown innovator, Rachel Klein. The piece was tightened to ninety-minutes in order to meet festival regulations, and was a financial and critical success. The play has since been published by a small press, Next Stage Press.

Because I self-produced each production of *Hound*, a question that arises is “are these productions legitimate?” That is, are they merely “vanity productions?” If so, is the Off-Off Broadway production a failure, despite critical success? On one hand, it would have been satisfying to earn a LORT (League of Resident – i.e., “regional”—Theatre) production. However, that did not seem likely. Therefore, I self-produced as an alternative to mainstream production simply because it was the only way to ensure my work saw production. Both productions were also artistically satisfying.



What I have just highlighted are several of the surface problems of the twentieth and twenty-first-century American theatre. As I move forward with the bulk of this study, and, while taking these conversations/concerns into account (regional, community, commercial and self-production), the major questions I intend to ask, as a practitioner and as a scholar, are: Why is the role of the playwright necessary? In what ways can a twenty-first-century playwright operate within and/or against the current machinery of American theatrical production? Is there a kind of production that is more legitimate than another kind? If so, how does that mode feed into the current trends in playwriting, and, more specifically, how does it support current ideologies surrounding the playwright function? How do workshops have prior expectations that limit playwright creativity or shape a work for a particular market, according to a supposed idea of a good or proper play? In short, I am going to look at the conditions of *the process as product* of new American plays, that is, the ways in which plays are developed and re-developed through workshops and readings in front of audiences in place of productions, and how this format structures our understanding of the twenty-first-century American playwright; and, second, and perhaps more significantly, I am going to highlight the ways in which playwrights have taken matters into their own hands in order to move away from the relegated role of relic (which will be explained in chapters two and three), toward becoming a vital participant in theatrical meaning-making.

## SURVEY OF LITERATURE

### Practices of Post-War American Drama

How can we define the American theatre? One excellent survey of the Post-War American Drama is David Krasner's *American Drama: 1945-2000*. The work largely serves as a

primary text for undergraduate and early graduate students, highlighting plays that have been (more-or-less) canonized. In the introduction, Krasner argues “American drama conforms to no fixed set of rules; playwrights create independently, are informed by different concerns, and explore multiple ideas. Any consideration of a national literature benefits by the diversity this entails” (1). This outlook may suggest that the accepted canon of American drama (the “national literature”) features a plurality of works, different uses of language(s), visuals, and stages where ideologies meet, debate, and present issues of American social awareness that may rely on different aesthetic canvases. Krasner concludes: “Nevertheless, the creation of a national genre requires the recognition of a conceptual coherence” (1). This rather large “nevertheless” necessitates the omitting of a number of plays and playwrights who do not immediately fit with the concept of Krasner’s book, which includes looking at plays that deal with the “American experience” (1).

While it may be argued that any play written in the United States automatically suggests an “American experience,” Krasner’s need to focus on socio-historic moments (the Cold War, the rise of HIV/AIDS and gay/lesbian awareness, etc.) creates a sense of coherence between differing eras, and his analysis of plays (more than playwrights, with the exception of O’Neill and Miller) provides a basic understanding of how American plays are received by the public: that is, American plays are both about and define what it means to be American.

Leslie A. Wade’s *Sam Shepard and the American Theatre* creates a context for Shepard, and looks at the socio/cultural/political/and economic moments that suggest the structures that allowed for Shepard to exist in the role of “national playwright,” and his various works which champion the myth(s) of American identity. Wade’s ability to situate Shepard within the American cultural frame is useful for this dissertation in terms of creating a means to situate not

just a single playwright, but a larger playwright function. As Shepard was also a member of the Albarwild Playwrights Unit, the book furthermore serves as a useful and nuanced example of how a writer was shaped during the rise of decentralized theatre.

### The Role of the Independent Playwright

Other literature I intend to use focuses more on the independent theatre of New York beginning in the 1960s. Because one of my case studies is the New York Writers' Bloc, I want to be clear how I situate "the Bloc" within the context of New York City theatre during the late seventies, and how those moments were shaped (more-or-less) by previously existing workshops and production companies that gained notice in the 1960s. David Crespy's

*Off-Off Broadway Explosion: How Provocative Playwrights of the 1960s Ignited a New American Theater* offers an historical survey of the rise of non-commercial playwrights and New York playwriting workshops (such as the Albarwild Unit at Cherry Lane Theatre in lower Manhattan), though Crespy does not provide a theoretical context for the rise of the writer. Furthermore, by keeping the focus on the playwright, a number of key movements during the 1960s (the Performance Garage, happenings, etc.) are left out. However, that is also why the book is useful for this study: by keeping the playwright front-and-center during the radical sixties, Crespy keenly focuses on various developmental and production organizations which proliferated in smaller venues in New York City. With the growing concerns of money-making (financial survival), Off-Off Broadway companies, like the regional theatres, have made the move to not-for-profit, which relies on outside grants, suggesting that produced works are also guided into a more acceptable aesthetic than the earlier "radical sixties" phase of New York independent theatre.

Stephen Bottoms's *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off Broadway Movement* is perhaps the best survey of the radical sixties-era New York City. Of particular interest to me are the chapters dealing with the Off-Off Broadway playwright. In chapter seven, for example, Bottoms focuses on the aesthetic: playwrights were moving away from realism in Off-Off Broadway venues, and those who chose to follow realism could not find an audience. One of my interests is following the aesthetics of the American drama and how it has (or has not) changed during the twentieth century. A previous chapter, which deals with the playwrights at LaMama, Etc., and at the Albarwild Playwrights Unit, explores the ways in which these and other small theatre companies were looking to introduce their resident writers into the larger world. I am interested in Bottoms's take on this aspect, as Crespy (*Off-Off Broadway Explosion*) has spent a lot of time looking at the Albarwild Playwrights Unit in his research (both in his book, and in various articles). Bottoms's approach is less of a love letter than Crespy's, explaining that the Playwrights Unit was a "halfway house" between the commercial theatre and the café scenes of Off-Off Broadway (Bottoms 84). My interest is, as always, in looking at who is being served by the playwriting workshops, not only in terms of audience aesthetic expectations, but also in terms of how a producer or artistic director is looking to benefit, and beyond that, how the *process as product* of workshops speaks to a given cultural moment.

Each of these works serves to ground the playwright in an historic moment. Krasner looks at the landscape of written plays post-World War II, and how these plays define (or rally against) notions of nationhood; Bottoms and Crespy highlight the practices of play production in the New York independent theatre during the early days of Off-Off Broadway; and Les Wade brings in notions of nationhood, the structures that pave the way for a certain kind of play to be

written, as well as the structures that create the playwright function, in this case, the function of Sam Shepard as the author of American myth.

In recent years, scholars have suggested there are ways to obviate canonical qualifiers, which ultimately dictate the terms of who can, and who cannot, be construed as an American playwright. The December 2010 issue of *Theatre Journal* is dedicated to women playwrights, and how they are marginalized in the larger apparatus of American theatre (in this case, Regional, Broadway, and Off-Broadway). Jill Dolan's article, "Making a Spectacle, Making a Difference," looks at the ways in which the "rise of the woman playwright" is cyclical; that is, according to Dolan, every ten years or so there is an emergence of women playwrights that suggests a turning of the tide, and, yet, women are still faced by the larger hegemony that accepts, assimilates, or rejects art that is for-and-by women. As Jill Dolan suggests, "women in theatre are still not controlling the means of their own production or the discourse that characterizes their work" (564), and any time a woman is making artistic choices for a company, "she is acting like a man – a retrograde description of good business practices" (564). According to a study performed by the Theatre Communications Group (TCG) and published in *American Theatre* in 2009, there were six productions by men for every production by women in the regional theatre (563). Dolan concludes:

...if the figures published by TCG and other arts information-aggregating sources considered theatres outside the Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional theatre umbrella, the data might change significantly. Many theatre companies (in New York alone) are run by women who have an effective business sense and an innovative artistic vision that takes women's work seriously – Maria Striar at Clubbed Thumb, Susan Bernfield at New Georges, and Melody Brooks at New Perspectives are just three examples. If smaller theatres like these – and HERE, 13P, Soho Rep, and many others across the country were considered, the numbers might look different for women playwrights and the balance of gendered power might demonstrably shift. Refocusing away from New York and Broadway and

the conventional regional theatres as the arbiter of success could change the national conversation (565).

What Dolan is arguing for is the redefining of success, away from regional, Off-Broadway, and Broadway productions. If “the national conversation” is to change, then the discourse surrounding “success” has to be re-examined, and at the very least, opened wider to include smaller theatre companies Off-Off Broadway and around the country, in order to truly have an understanding of the function of the woman playwright, artistic director, producer, etc. Therefore, the question has to be: what does it mean to have success as a theatre practitioner, or specific to the present study, a playwright? This is a question I will return to throughout these pages.

### Playwriting Workshops

Several scholarly works that engage with new play development have emerged over the past twenty-two years that are insightful, but also leave more to be desired. For example, Douglas Anderson’s “Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development” is an incredible history of the replication and reproduction of the workshop model, but it was published in 1988. The recent study, *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*, written by Todd London, Ben Pesner and Zannie Giraud Voss, is, as suggested earlier, the current central text, providing a standard for new play development research. In the introduction, the authors claim:

This study describes a collaboration in crisis. Our report locates that crisis not in the individual writers, artistic directors, or producers, but in a *system of theatrical production* that has become increasingly inhospitable to the cultivation of new work for the stage, despite an apparent dedication to it. (2)

Furthermore, “[t]his report is an attempt to document and understand the ecosystem of new-play production nationwide – through surveys, statistical findings, national conversations and individual interviews” (2). The “report” has become a must-read for playwrights, though it is problematic for several reasons: first, most of the interviewed playwrights are kept anonymous; while that certainly protects playwrights who speak out against the production mechanism of American theatre, their quotes tend to lack context (a point I shall return to). Second, in an effort to be exhaustive, some of the statistics/charts/graphs that suggest proof via empirical data are also opinion-based. Third, the bulk of the interviews for *Outrageous Fortune* were conducted at the Humana Festival in 2009 and at the Theatre Communications Group’s national conference, which immediately suggests a limited number of playwrights (who are, for the most part, produced at LORT theatres). This is not to discredit the findings, but to suggest that the authors’ argument certainly has questionable aspects.

The book has earned praise, but has also found detractors. There are several points in *Outrageous Fortune* that are worth being brought into this study: for playwrights, “the non-profit theatre *is* the theatre” (3). While at first glance, this suggests there is more freedom as plays exist outside of the commercial model, what has actually occurred is a proliferation of developmental agencies that need to continue generating new (yet unproduced) work in order to satisfy grants (see Douglas Anderson’s “The Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development”).

Another important point the authors make is that the playwrights who are the most frequently produced are from one of a handful of universities, the most visible being Yale and Brown, suggesting a cultural elitism in theatre development and production (74-75). This selectivity leads to questions of access for playwrights not in the proverbial loop: can a

playwright without a terminal degree even achieve a regional production if he or she is not already somehow affiliated/visible?

Perhaps the most important insight in this book, given the current elitism in new play production, is that process has become the production; that is, the never-ending development cycle has become the product, while actual *production*, which is the chief aim for many, if not all, playwrights, has been much more difficult to achieve even with an Ivy-League degree (95). Although I have avoided using the commercial theatre to provide examples, *Outrageous Fortune* includes a graph indicating the “average number of new plays on Broadway per year”: between 1920 and 1940, the average was 120; between 1980 and 2000, the average was fourteen (24). Although the not-for-profit theatre is much larger than the commercial theatre, it is nevertheless modeled on the commercial theatre in terms of the hiring of artistic staff and reliance on audience (with commercial theatre, the reliance is box-office; with the not-for-profit, it mostly comes from corporate grants and individual donors; see my discussion with Bob Jude Ferrante regarding risk in chapter three). What I would suggest, based on these numbers, is that more plays are being written than have a hope of production.

Some of the other points made by London, Pesner and Voss, however, are commonplace in the playwriting world, and I have already addressed them: playwrights are unable to support themselves by writing alone; there are more grant opportunities for women and minorities, but even fewer production opportunities; the “development” rhetoric that is part of Hollywood and screenwriting has infiltrated the playwriting world (49-61; 63-73; 86-96). Although these insights are commonplace, I do not mean to imply that these circumstances are acceptable. Rather, they are indications of the cultural (and financial) elitism that has become normative vis-à-vis whose work is developed and produced on the American stage.



While a number of notable playwrights have lauded the book (there have been a number of articles dealing with *Outrageous Fortune* in *The Dramatist*, including an interview conducted by Guild Executive Gary Garrison with two of the book's authors), those outside of the discipline of playwriting have noted some of the work's shortcomings. For Paula Tomei, the managing director of South Coast Repertory, who was interviewed in *American Theatre* regarding the book, the problem with the anonymity of the playwrights is that there lacks a "context by which to evaluate their statements" (55). She continues, "Clearly the book's authors wanted unvarnished honesty from the people they interviewed but all too often what the speakers are honestly expressing are opinions or subjective impressions." More damning for Tomei is "the book's tendency to arrive at generalizations from such anecdotal evidence or from statistical information that attempts to quantify what seems essentially unquantifiable" (55). On one hand, South Coast Rep. is implicated by the study, as it is a member of The National New Play Network and a prestigious regional theatre. On the other hand, Tomei's criticisms do shed some light on why those outside of the discipline of playwriting may choose to ignore the findings in *Outrageous Fortune*.

My hope in this work is to shed more light on the larger problems that face the playwright, in regard to the writer's function in the American theatre. Rejecting the findings in *Outrageous Fortune* is just as problematic as embracing them. While *Outrageous Fortune* situates the current trends in new play development as part of the ongoing crisis of the playwright/artist's breakdown in communication with the production staff at (mostly regional) theatres due to the finances involved in production, it ultimately falls short due to the authors' need to highlight the divide between the writer and the (lack of) production apparatus, without

putting their finger on the pulse of the problem: playwrights are becoming less necessary to the theatre, and unless the playwright takes action, this will not change.

For several of the playwrights I interviewed, Edward Cohen's book, *Working on a New Play: A Play Development Handbook for Actors, Directors, Designers and Playwrights*, is one of the most important and exciting works that tackles directly the sense of joy and ultimate disappointment that actors, directors, and playwrights (may) feel during an uncertain life in the theatre. Cohen's work is very conversational. Most important for this work, Cohen recognizes the importance of independent theatre (in this case, Off-Off Broadway) for playwrights:

[...] Off-Off Broadway, where young actors are going to work, is essentially a *writer's world*. Its purpose is to offer playwrights a place to learn and grow; a function the commercial theatre can no longer afford to fulfill. [emphasis added] (xiii)

Although dated, (my edition is from 1995, and the book has not been revised from the first 1988 printing), Cohen indicates that the independent theatre *is* home for playwrights. My own experiences have suggested as much, and my research (which includes interviews with members of 13P, The Axial, and Sanctuary: Playwrights Theatre) confirms it. I should also mention, though he only gives it a paragraph, the New York Writers' Bloc (chapter three) is championed by Cohen, not because it serves as a haven for writers, but rather because it serves as a perfect opportunity for young actors; in Cohen's words, "The actor who can connect with a talented young writer is wise to jump at the opportunity" (9). Cohen gives equal importance to the writer, director, and designers: after all, they are all looking for production work.

One of the members of the New York Writers' Bloc was Michael Wright, who has written several books on playwriting and new play development. In the introduction to *Playwriting at Work and Play: Developmental Programs and Their Processes*, Wright argues that the playwriting process is a negotiation between "art" and "commerce." He notes:

The concepts in this book are based on the idea that “art is good” and “commerce is maybe not so good” – however simplistic that may seem – largely because of crucial differences in the delivery system often used to turn art into product. Process is critical to the integrity of the work, but even more so to the artist who grows through one process toward the next, honing his/her craft, becoming more capable of expressing his or her vision. Commerce, especially without any sense of process, often seizes on an artist to be the flavor-of-the-moment, and then discards the artist like an empty wrapper (xi)

While there is no argument that an artist is ultimately responsible for the work he or she produces, and, furthermore, that a developmental process (whether that includes a workshop or not) is important for the growth of a work, the function of process has *become* product in a number of not-for-profit theatre companies.

The issue at hand with Wright’s book has more to do with what he is trying to achieve: that is, is the book trying to look specifically at models of play development that are ideal? Or are they case studies of a handful of prominent developmental companies? If the latter is the case, there is no clear suggestion as to which is the best (though he certainly seems to lean toward Sundance Playlabs), or, even more important, which should be avoided by playwrights. While he provides a brief history of development, and highlights the argument for and against workshops at the end of his introduction, he virtually ignores the conversation in order to move on to the case studies. At the time of writing this dissertation, Wright has said that he is going to look at the book again, and give it a clearer sense of purpose (more than likely, with an eye toward which development organizations are most playwright-friendly).

While each of these texts is important to my research, each is also problematic: *Outrageous Fortune* serves as an excellent primary text in terms of research conducted at regional theatres; however, the anonymous anecdotes from writers and artistic directors lose a sense of context and may be written off as a series of bitter generalities that cannot heal the divide between the playwright and the larger production apparatus. While healing the divide may

not be the goal of the book, I argue that it can do even more damage, as several artistic directors and critics have written it off, as playwrights appear “self-indulgent” and “whining” (Jones). Furthermore, it operates from the standpoint that playwrights want not only a production, but a “long, commercial run” (26). Is this truly the wish of every playwright? While I am certain most writers would not turn down the opportunity to have a long, commercial run, I do question whether or not a production at a smaller theatre could not be just as satisfying--or a meeting of playwrights in a living room, reading plays and exchanging ideas. Could this situation lead to a kind of artistic joy which, perhaps, the regional theatre (despite visibility) fails to provide? Finally, because most of the interviews were conducted at regional theatres (Arena Stage and at the Actors Theatre of Louisville), those being interviewed have already achieved some mark of visibility, but remain unsatisfied – they want *more*. While there is nothing wrong with wanting more, the book provides a very narrow view of both the playwrightfunction’s *modus operandi* and notion of success.

Cohen’s book champions new play development because, for Cohen, the play is always heading toward a production (because Cohen’s work traces plays from Off-Off Broadway success to commercial productions – *Little Shop of Horrors* is one example he lists – it can be argued that he, too, is thinking in terms of commercial theatre). However, this is not the case; Off-Off Broadway does not operate as a rung in a ladder, in which the next rung would be Off-Broadway, and Broadway the rung after that. Part of the issue is that Cohen’s book, like Anderson’s article, has become outdated, both in methodology and in regard to the playwright’s aspirations (i.e., a commercial run).

Michael Wright’s work offers a number of excellent interviews and case-studies, but ultimately loses footing because of the scope of the book: are the case studies offered the “best

case scenario,” or is it just a random sampling of developmental programs and their practices? It is my hope to fill the void by highlighting the ways in which the playwright function has been diminished via an historic overview of the playwright function and the workshop models (chapter two), and by examining the ways in which playwrights have banded together to create a new context for the American playwright, one which leaves room for difference, theatricality, and control of the craft of writing (chapters three, four and five).

## METHODS AND APPROACHES

In this work, I intend to use the lens of material semiotics (as described by Ric Knowles in *Reading the Material Theatre*) in order to evaluate the ways in which meaning is created by the theatre industry, which includes the theatre artists/practitioners, the audience, and the – context – that is, the physical architectural structure where the work is being performed. From there, the case studies I intend to use will highlight the ways in which meaning-making practices are once again being shaped by authorial control, via playwright-led, playwright-centered workshops and self-production, making the author the *auteur* of his or her work. While this does not negate the role of the audience in the process of making meaning, it does allow for, at the very least, a certain sense of agency for playwrights which has been more or less lost due to the proliferation of developmental centers.

Cultural materialism refers to the production and reproduction of meaning, which, as Knowles points out via Scott Wilson, includes “*historical context, theoretical method, political commitment, and textual analysis*” (qtd. 13). That is, the approach values “historicizing here and now,” and resisting “myths of progress that see the present as the natural state of things,” locating the “I” in history and historiography,” and analyzing a plurality of texts, which include

the coded human body, and the world around us. This last point brings in the “semiotics” lens, that is, the “reading” (and shared meaning-making) of visual signs, not just written/spoken language (13).

Because shared cultural practices create, code, and decode meaning, Knowles’s work is useful for discussing the ways in which theatre creates meaning via a three-poled system: “Performance Text,” “Conditions of production,” and “Conditions of reception” (18-19). Although Knowles fails to give attention to playwrights and playwright training, which he does give to actors, directors, and designers (thereby suggesting that plays, and therefore playwrights, are a given), he nevertheless creates a useful lens for discussing the material mechanisms of new play development and the role of the playwright.

Other works that will help me investigate the use of space include Marvin Carlson’s *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*. Although Carlson’s work is more of an investigation of the actual location of a theatre structure in regards to the rest of a town or city (thereby suggesting the cultural ideology of the given town or city), the semiotics of arrangement is useful in regards to where actors, directors, and playwrights all sit and stand, as well as what items are present (music stands, tables) during a staged reading.

A term that I have used several times is “memetic,” or “meme.” This term was coined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. In this book, Dawkins suggests that the scientific phenomenon of evolution can also guide cultural change (as cultural memes are equivalent to biological genes vis-à-vis adaptation and survival). Although I do not intend to ground this work in the “survival of the fittest,” nevertheless the wide-spread replication of the workshop model, specifically the one developed at the O’Neill Conference in the late 1960s, falls in line with Dawkin’s research (he considers architecture, music, and fashion; various cultural threads that

alter via human interaction, and the culturally/economically “fittest” survives). Because Dawkins uses the term “memetic” to suggest the replication of various aspects of culture, I believe “memetics” can also be used to discuss the rapid proliferation of workshops, and of the specific models highlighted in chapter two.

In a larger sense, this study incorporates some of the anarchistic tendencies of twenty-first century philosophers, who suggest a variety of means to reclaim notions of autonomy and agency as a kind of post-poststructuralist thought. From a bird’s-eye-view, poststructuralist thought posits that there are masked (or obscured) ideological powers that create, guide, shape and regulate notions of (performative) gender, race, and economic class through the use of culturally agreed upon language and institutions. These powers divide and control lower economic classes, in an attempt to reinforce the status-quo. One poststructuralist thinker, Michel Foucault, argues throughout his works that power is not something that simply says “no,” but rather creates multitudes of subversive behaviors when power is exerted. These subversions are often assimilated by the dominant ideology. For Gramsci, the anarchistic tendencies operate to push away from those in power, recognizing, what Gramsci calls *hegemony*, meaning that those in power can mislead individuals into thinking they are operating for their own cause, while actually operating in favor of the powers-that-be. Works such as *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* by Richard Day trace the anarchist function, while trying to draw a history between the twenty-first century revolutionary and its yesteryear counterpart (and therefore, highlighting socio-economic-political conditions which surround each anarchistic movement or individual). What this work suggests, along with works such as Simon Critchley’s *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, and Judith Butler’s *Giving and Account of Oneself*, is that the twenty-first century thinker is

considering ways in which the individual can operate within a larger network in order to create social change.

While these works may seem somewhat utopian, I do advocate perhaps just “a little anarchy.” That is to say, playwrights *should* take the means of process and production into their own hands, however, with different goals and ambitions in mind: to give hypothetical examples, a playwright might feel *satisfied* with a reading in a workshop environment; a playwright might feel *artistically fulfilled* with a production at a small venue in Southern Louisiana; other playwrights might see alternative models, too, such as the “do-it-yourself” production, as a unique pipeline into mainstream acceptance (meaning, visibility at regional, Off-Broadway, or Broadway theatre).

Because my chief aim is to look at the new American play as a part of the industrial process of theatre-making, my dissertation will have two functions: the first will be descriptive, and somewhat speculative: I will give an overview of the status quo, by introducing a brief history of the playwriting workshop, and how the present models are grounded in a process of meaning-making embedded in a set of cultural artistic codes. I will also consider the production of a play that has been through a series of developmental programs, and suggest the work was ultimately not successful – and by “successful” in this sense, I mean critically, as it was developed through a series of visible workshops and produced by a major LORT theatre. In other words, if the American theatre’s process-as-product mindset cannot offer a work that, when produced, is a critical success, then hasn’t it failed the playwright function?

The second aspect of this dissertation is prescriptive, as I will look at four case studies that challenge the present workshop models and the push to marginalize the playwright-function, by redefining what it means to have success with a play, as well as a feeling of artistic success as



a theatrically thinking playwright (chapter four). In the chapters that follow, I argue that the “do-it-yourself” initiative, whether located within a workshop or production apparatus, can not only open notions of the aesthetic of the American drama, but it can function to resolve some of the larger concerns that the LORT theatres have failed to: create an environment where the playwright functions within the larger theatre apparatus in an environment that is collaborative, creative, and nurturing; create a model which takes production costs into consideration, and therefore finds ways to create viable work without relying on unaffordable contracts; create a model which is local, and in dialogue with the larger community. While this may sound like a republican polemic, I argue that a number of theatres that operate under LORT contracts are first and foremost responsible to the organizations that have endowed them; many of these organizations are corporations, which immediately suggests a kind of barrier to works which are experimental, and works which may operate against an audience’s immediate comfort zone.

The status quo narrows the horizon of expectations for new plays, as well as the potential and possibilities of new plays. The workshop model, in turn, narrows the possibilities of what plays and which playwrights go forward, which ultimately narrows the possibilities of the American theatre itself. Finally, how the American theatre defines success, meaning a LORT production, provides a limited understanding of artistic fulfillment. The “do-it-yourself” model asks for a little playwright anarchy so that a success can include readings and discussions in a playwright’s living room, small productions offered in New York City (Equity or non-Equity), community theatre productions that speak *to* and are answered *by* a community (in lieu of the failures of Regional theatre to actually *be* for and by the region), and publications with smaller presses that understand the failings of the current model (which include Next Stage Press, JAC Publishing, and Norman Maine). This model offers alternatives to the professional (LORT)

circuit, allowing, on one hand, the playwright to remain as a primary artist in American drama; and as a pedagogical side-effect, playwrights become immersed in the full mechanics of production by taking on the role of artistic director, and learning the languages of design, acting, directing, and marketing. The playwright is no longer a relic, but a Renaissance man or woman. It is my hope that these examples will be followed by more companies wishing to engage with the twenty-first-century writer, rather than support the current structures of the new American drama.

## ISSUES AND QUALIFICATIONS

Some of the terms I use are rather broad, so I want to clearly create the parameters for the various models I will be examining over the course of this work.

1) A focus on the independent theatre: I want to make it clear what I am speaking about when I talk about the American theatre (which could include Broadway, Off-Broadway, Off-Off Broadway, Regional Theatre, Little Theatre, Community Theatre, Academic Theatre, etc.). For my purposes, I am looking at the emerging playwright in the world of not-for-profit theatre (i.e., not Broadway). Although there are workshop models prior to the decentralization of theatre in 1957, which brought forth the Ford Foundation for Playwrights the following year, this seems like the ideal starting point for the proliferation of workshops across America (Anderson 57), as a playwright's legitimacy became tied to a specific workshop rather than a production or production venue. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, for the twenty-first-century American playwright, the not-for-profit theatre *is* the theatre, and, therefore, the American playwright is rarely engaged with the commercial theatre.

2) Use of the term “American playwright”: For this work, I will use the term “American playwright” to define the playwright of the United States. I am taking this cue from *American Theatre Magazine*, which is devoted to theatrical practice in the U.S. I realize that this term is loaded (what of Mexico? Canada? South America? etc.), and in the U.S. today, what it means to be *American* brings a host of definitions and anxieties too deep (and sometimes, too shallow) to tackle in this dissertation (such as, is an American someone born on U.S. soil? Is an American *less* American if he or she was not born on U.S. soil? If he or she is undocumented?). Because I wish to locate this work in a discourse that includes both the practice of American theatre and scholarship of the theatre of the U.S., I will use the phrase “American” to include the fifty states that constitute the United States of America.

3) Aesthetic conformity and influence of realism: In short, what I am addressing is the apparatus and ways of thinking that govern the theatre in the U.S., and how the playwright function is both a product of, and a support to, the ways in which new plays are developed and produced. This process has resulted in a streamlining of the aesthetic of American drama to a realism that is more akin to television and film. This aesthetic has become normative due to the financial concerns of the not-for-profit regional theatres. Michael Bigelow Dixon, former literary manager for the Actors Theatre of Louisville and Director of Studio Programming at The Guthrie Theatre, has suggested that it is “curious” that “realism is a fall-back position,” as realism is the primary aesthetic of the late nineteenth-century (Dixon Interview). He continues:

the [twenty-first-century] world differs so much from the [late-nineteenth-century] world of Ibsen, Chekov, and Pinero, that it’s curious to me that the forms of that era, and the conventions of that era are still the dominant conventions of that time in non-musical theatre. (Dixon Interview).

This study agrees with Dixon's suggestion that realism, while a viable aesthetic form for the American drama, should not be the only aesthetic championed, and accepted as "good" by the theatre industry.

American realism is a genre of painting, literature, and drama, born out of a nineteenth-century art movement (two movements, if one also counts naturalism); however, with American realism as a genre of drama, discussing tenets of realism is not as easy as discussing authors who write in this genre (i.e., Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, August Wilson, Lee Blessing, Marsha Norman, etc.). In reviewing *The Portable Theatre: American Literature and the Nineteenth-Century Stage* by Alan L. Ackerman, Jr., Bruce McConachie notes the difficulty with which scholars have approached defining realism. Scholars have defined realism in relation to either musical theatre or melodrama. Indeed, it had been accepted practice, according to McConachie, that scholarship traced the development of realism as a both a product and rejection of melodrama (143). As McConachie discusses, Ackerman's book continues the tradition of drawing difference between melodrama and realism as a means of defining what realism is in the theatre:

Drawing on earlier historians and critics, he [Ackerman] uses his first chapter to line up fundamental differences between melodrama and realism on the stage, and this dichotomy structures his subsequent discussion: complex plots and simple characters versus fewer incidents and more psychologically complex characters; emphasis on physical action versus emphasis on language; concern with social morality versus concern with individual ethics. (143)

The creation of distinctions between two genres ignores the fact that many authors, according to McConachie, have "synthesized the two" (143). Furthermore, "Hollywood, of course, continues to manufacture films and television programs that fit very snugly into several adequate definitions of melodrama and realism. To oppose melodrama to realism makes little critical or historical sense" (143).

Defining American realism becomes even more complex when considering the work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, two of the most visible writers of twentieth-century American realism, who incorporate elements of the first-wave avant-garde into their works (*Death of a Salesman* by Miller features elements of expressionism; *The Glass Menagerie* features projections as a nod to Brecht's alienation-effect). How then, can we define American realism?

For this work, American realism will refer to any play written by a United States playwright which is structured into a cause-and-effect narrative, featuring psychologically driven characters, relying on minimal set values (either a unit set or a set which can be represented with chairs and stage blocks), and which may on occasion include an element of the avant-garde, but only insofar as it serves to highlight the psychological complexities of the central character (in other words, no theatrics for the sake of theatrics). The plays of American realism feature a social contract (to borrow a term from realist literary theory) in which characters perform "the speech acts (promises, vows of forgiveness) [and/or] the handshakes and kisses" indicating a healing between a central character and another psychologically complex character (Wardley). For example, consider Biff and Willy Loman's reconciliation in *Death of a Salesman*, or the lack of reconciliation between Laura and Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, which leads to Tom's inability to escape the image of his sister seated near a candle. These moments of healing indicate a wish to return to a status quo, which was central to the structure of the well-made-drama of the nineteenth century, and which continues into the twenty-first century.

In her article "*Death of a Salesman* and Dramatic Liberalism," Andrea Most has given the most concrete purpose of dramatic realism, which still haunts the American realist genre, and therefore, the workshop model:

The overarching goal of dramatic realism was to create a believable world into which audiences could enter both intellectually and emotionally, forgetting that they were in the theatre for the two or three hours of the play, in order to sympathize more fully with the characters on the stage. Actors in the realist theatre worked hard to create the sense of a complete world on the stage and avoided, at all cost, the habits of performers in more self-consciously theatrical genres – exaggerating gestures, vocal styles, or emotions, breaking character, referring self-consciously to the audience beyond the footlights. (55)

In short, American realism relies on the well-made-play structure of cause-and-effect while relying on psychologically complex characters to reach a moment of healing, or an unfulfilled need for healing in order to create a self-contained world that an audience could empathize with for the period of two-or-more hours. Moments of theatricality, such as Loman's moments of memory in *Death of a Salesman*, were used to show the inner-struggles of the central character, and were not meant to break any sense of a fourth wall between the characters and the audience (Most 550-551).

4) Financial conditions and status of American theatre: According to Douglas Anderson, the financial status of the American theatre is grim, in part, due to the “immense size of the [theatre-making] industry”:

A common perception is that there is not enough financial support for new work, that somehow foundations and executive officers of major companies have failed to bankroll what we like to call "research and development." [...] Everyone feels we should be doing more for American playwriting. But the slightest amount of spadework uncovers a history of over-whelming support for new work, a vast array of grants and programs designed to sniff out talent and give it room to grow. We are awash in support for new work. In fact, there's a very real possibility that we're drowning in it. (Anderson 55-56)

Part of what Anderson looks at are the finances of new play development, and how the decentralizing of theatre actually backfired. That is, by attempting to move theatre away from the myth of New York (or the “dream” of “If I can make it there...”), regional theatres, such as the Alley and Actors Theatre of Louisville, which had originally showcased local

talent/professionals, started creating works with an eye toward New York (Broadway). Meanwhile, a number of Broadway and Off-Broadway theatres that had been committed to producing new work, such as The Arc on Bleecker Street, were forced to close due to economic turmoil (58). Indeed, even Playwrights Horizons, created by Robert Moss with the notion of “fanning every flame,” had to re-vision itself as being committed to only a handful of writers who passed through, as the economy had changed (59-60). As Andre Bishop, the artistic director of Playwright Horizons in 1987 noted in an interview with Douglas Anderson, ““I went cuckoo when I couldn't relate our 'eminence' and acceptance as a theatre in the press, funding, etc., with the despair and lack of money. We won the Pulitzer for a show we did, on the one hand. On the other – we have no hot water" (60). In short, Anderson finds that the money was there for production, but the production climate became timid with the rise of the developmental workshop, and the *process as product*.

Because of the financial risk involved with producing at the major regional theatres, plays have become “safer” for consumption; that is, the aesthetic is more or less geared toward realism, with plays being “workshopped to death” in order to create the safest (i.e., most “economically viable”) work with the minimal amount of risk. Staged readings involve very little money, and can still attract an audience, thereby creating a sense of community with an audience and a theatre, but without theatrical production. This is the function of the American playwright in the regional theatre: to create safe, realistic bets in order to (nervously) build a homogenized national theatre community.

5) Success: I have already spent some time highlighting success, but again, I want to consider that success is not strictly financial (if financial success can play into the equation at all, as it is commonplace that most playwrights do not make their living writing plays). Rather, success is a

feeling of artistic fulfillment, which for many may come from a production, a reading, or a workshop. Because I use the term “success” broadly, I will be clear in each chapter as to how it operates when considering the larger theatrical apparatus. (I will consider the term “artistic fulfillment” in chapter six).

## VARIATIONS OF THE WORKSHOP AND RESIDENCIES

According to playwright Jeffrey Sweet, there are two distinct workshop models: the first is a model that is geared toward the writer, that is, a workshop in which writers are a part of a company, and scripts are brought in over a period of time. The writer may bring in different scripts in different phases of development. An example of this model would be the Actors Studio Playwrights Unit (now the Playwrights/Directors Unit), in which writers brought in a section of a script at a time in order to tell an entire story. These workshops are not necessarily producing organizations; however, they operate under the claim of helping a writer find his or her own voice in a safe and nurturing environment (Sweet Interview).

The second version of the playwriting workshop is one that is geared toward the play. An example of this model would be the O’Neill Playwrights Conference, in which seven or eight scripts are selected out of a seven to eight hundred during an open submission process, and the work is developed, culminating with a staged-reading at the end of a week’s time. Another example would be the Humana Festival at the Actors Theatre of Louisville in Kentucky, where plays are accepted via an open call for scripts, and developed toward production for the spring season. While all three of these organizations do not have the kind of transparency they claim (democratic submission policies, a safe-haven for writers, etc.) at the very least, these are the



notions under which they operate. I will look more closely at the Actors Studio, the O'Neill, and the Humana in chapter two.

The idea of having a writer in residence is a strong one, and for a number of playwrights interviewed in the present study, it is in fact ideal. However, defining the residency becomes problematic. How far should companies go? Rob Handel, founding member of 13P, has suggested that when a theatre company brings a playwright in, that they not only “dedicate a season” to his or her works, but also give the playwright “an office right in the building,” thereby making them feel like an important member of the company (Handel Interview). As of now, residency by-and-large falls outside of the American practice of theatre. Because this is the case, I will not spend time looking at playwriting residencies, as my focus will be on development and production. However, because residencies do exist, I felt it was appropriate recognizing my choice to otherwise leave residencies out of the conversation early in this study, rather than leave the reader wondering if residencies could offer an alternative to the culture of development.

## MATERIALS AND DATA

In creating this dissertation, I have relied on existing scholarship, reviews of plays, and playwriting texts. I have also conducted interviews with members of the New York Writers' Bloc, Axial Theatre, The Playwrights Center of Minneapolis, 13P, Sanctuary: Playwrights Theatre, and others working in the not-for-profit theatre. Because quotes are attributed (unlike the various interviews found in *Outrageous Fortune*), those who have been interviewed may be “holding back;” however, the context for the quotes (who is talking, and where he or she locates him- or herself in the American theatre industry) are just as important as the quotes themselves.

I have also attended panels and discussions regarding the American Theatre. On Monday, October 19, 2010, for example, I attended the opening discussion for Lark Play Development Center's Playwrights Week in New York City. The Lark operates as a "rehearsal company," according to Artistic Director and Founder John Clinton Eisner, although The Lark's aim is not production. While their submission process is blind, and their mission states that they are "nurturing new voices and new ideas," there are questions of access to the Lark given the record of people who have been involved, including Theresa Rebeck, Sarah Ruhl, Lloyd Suh, all of whom are visible, and have had managed careers prior to working with the Lark (Eisner, "Welcome to Playwright's Week!"). On November 4, 2010, I attended a discussion at The Drama Book Shop in New York City, led by American Theatre scholars, Marc Robinson and David Savran. Finally, on February 8, 2011, I attended the "Self-Production Panel" with The Dramatists Guild of America, Inc., the open-shop union for playwrights. The conversation was moderated by Roland Tec, a producer and Director of Membership for the Dramatists Guild, with panelists Rich Orloff, Elyse Singer, and Kathleen Wornock, all of whom are "self-producers," and Dianne DeBicella, founding member of Fractured Atlas, Inc., a fiscal agency that provides independent artists and organizations with not-for-profit status.

This dissertation also features lectures and conversations given in public forums, such as a seminar given by Julie Dubiner, associate director of American Revolutions and at the Oregon Shakespeare festival and a former literary manager and dramaturge for The Actors Theatre of Louisville; and an online discussion with Janet Neipris, Head of Graduate Development and Professor of Playwriting at the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU. Because these discussions were given in public forum, a number of their ideas (and quotes) will also be used in this text.

Finally, this study has undertaken archival research: published interviews, reviews, and stories surrounding my case studies. Some of these interviews, reviews, etc., will be from print sources, and some will be from company websites, as well as material archived on the internet (such as past articles from *American Theatre Magazine* available through [www.tcg.org](http://www.tcg.org)). It is my belief that the use of the proposed theoretical lens, archival material, and first-person interviews are of equal importance in establishing the context for the playwright function, and the ways in which the playwright has found a new freedom by redefining the terms of playwright (and play) success.

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter two will begin with an overview of the playwriting workshop. Giving a detailed history of the playwriting workshop would be a work unto itself. Rather, I will briefly discuss the genealogy of the word “workshop,” and how it is applied to play development. I will touch on the 47 Workshop, New Dramatists, the Playwrights Unit (now known as the Playwrights/Directors Unit) at the Actors Studio, The O’Neill Playwrights Conference, and the Albarwild Playwrights Unit. I will suggest that these workshops are creating audience expectations, as well as tacit boundaries, rather than immediately serving the writer.

Chapter three builds on chapter two, highlighting the problems with new play development, the notion of “developmental hell,” and how theatres and agencies that serve new plays are creating a homogenous aesthetic that neither challenges the audience nor remains theatrical. I will also suggest that organizations geared toward producing plays, such as the National New Play Network, have failed to take notions of access into account, and ultimately produce playwrights who are already more-or-less visible. Then, I will offer a case study of *The*

*Cherry Sisters Revisited*, which was given a staged-reading at Louisiana State University prior to its production at the 2010 Humana Festival at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. Finally, I will give consideration to the canon of American drama, and how the creation of local “canons” can guide the “do-it-yourself” models that will be championed in chapters four through six.

Chapter four will begin with an overview of how the playwright function is taught in twenty-first century America, specifically to introduction to theatre students via Robert Cohen’s *Theatre*, 9<sup>th</sup> edition. From there, I will begin my exploration of how playwrights have moved away from the prescribed guidelines of what a playwright can and cannot do, and how these writers have built their own communities. The first group I will look at is the New York Writers’ Bloc, a playwright-centered/ playwright-created group (that is, a “do-it-yourself” workshop) which served as a place for exploration with the playwright’s craft, as well as a confidence-builder for those who had been through a few of the existing workshops. In particular, I will look at the ways in which the New York Writers’ Bloc used the workshop model created by the Actors Studio, but kept the playwright at the helm by asking all members (playwrights, actors, and directors) to try their hand at playwriting. I believe that by highlighting the working practices and methodologies of the Bloc (as members call it), playwrights will be able to gain insight into a writer-center model that creates a *theatre community* rather than supporting a larger institution and its ideologies (which I argue is the function of the Playwrights Unit at the Actors Studio).

Chapter five will highlight the production mechanics and aesthetic discoveries made via the “do-it-yourself” model. I will bring the economics of current play production into the fore, in order to highlight how the “do-it-yourself” model can operate on a small, local level. The first model I investigate is offered by 13P, an Off-Off Broadway company created by thirteen “mid-career” playwrights. Their agenda was to pool their resources and raise funds, in order to operate

as a company in which each playwright member receives a production of his or her own work. Furthermore, writers act as “artistic directors” of their work, which means they are responsible for the hiring of director, designer, marketing, etc. for their own plays. 13P operates, for some, as an alternative pipeline to mainstream visibility; for others, it allows them to experiment outside of the aesthetic of realism. In short, it provides a writer with the opportunity to experiment with form, and gain his or-her own vision of success. I will then consider another playwright-centered model, Sanctuary: Playwrights Theatre. Like 13P, this company operates in New York. Unlike 13P, they do not have a visible advocate (Pulitzer-Prize-Winning Paula Vogel has acted as an unofficial agent for 13P), nor do they have 13P’s “implosion mechanism” (after each playwright is produced, 13P will cease to exist). Rather, they find the funding resources for playwright/producers, who then are responsible for the production of their work within the given budget.

Chapter six brings these elements – community and finances – together, highlighting the practices of a “do-it-yourself” model. In turn, this model has built an artistic community that has a dialogic relation with the community-at-large. That is, the virtually unknown Axial Theatre Company in Pleasantville, New York provides a model in which new play development and production can truly *serve* a community, something the regional theatre has failed to do. For example, a number of regional theatres cast their plays by bringing in name-actors and name-playwrights, rather than cultivating area artists. While I believe there is value in bringing in a few name actors or a name director (both as a pedagogical tool and for cultural caché), The Axial model suggests working professionals should work *alongside*, rather than in lieu of, community artists. What each case study will offer is a way to address the current problems with the construction of the playwright function, and the aesthetic conformity (to realism) of the current

American drama, while taking economics, notions of community, and a variety of definitions of success into account.

Chapter seven will conclude this work, foregrounding my findings with the “do-it-yourself” models, while considering some of the issues of “quality control” that may emerge from a little playwright anarchy. While various ideas of success are important to this study, as well as the suggestion to circumvent the current machinery of American theatre, the conclusion will consider the questions of whether or not we need an explosion of new plays, whether or not they are “good” (which is, granted, an arbitrary standard), and whether or not, just because a play is written, it should be read or produced. While creative expression can be a reward in and of itself, to what extent should writers obviate the current machinery of American production, and for what purpose? I argue that a playwright’s responsibility is recognizing his-or-her local community, and therefore, the playwright needs to fully understand his-or-her function as a community member. Theatre is a local event, and relationships, I argue, should be forged at a local level (whether the writer is situated in New York City, a suburb, or a small town a distance away from any major metropolis).

Because of the varying definitions of success, at times I will validate my case studies when one of the writers or works does get snatched up by the industry (as sign of having made it). At other times the joy of having a work done is reward enough. Always, however, I want to keep at the fore that the playwright is a primary artist in *collaboration* with a community of artists, working *for* the larger, immediate community in which he or she is situated.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY/ STAKES

As I have mentioned earlier, *Outrageous Fortune* and *Playwriting at Work and Play* are geared toward playwrights. My aim is much broader, as I wish to engage the entire theatre community, in particular, American theatre scholars and dramaturges. My hope is that by looking at the systems of power that have shaped our notions of the American playwright through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (via the developmental workshops), we may be able to identify the necessity of the American drama as a worthy art form, and one that is currently in crisis. By championing the “do-it-yourself” format, it is my belief that the creation of local theatre models will have a vast effect on the national library of American theatre (or canon), which will be much more inclusive, diverse, and taxing to anthologize.

The challenges I face are personal: as a playwright, I am biting the proverbial hand that feeds me (to some extent; I am also by and large a self-producer). Also, for those who are regularly produced in the regional circuit, this work may be dismissed as a kind of sour grapes. However, the most important aspect of this work, in my opinion, is to recognize the subject “playwright” as being a construction of a given time, of a given circumstance. With the playwright losing confidence in his or her craft, it is vitally important that the playwright try to regain a sense of agency through the necessary risk of productions, and redefining for themselves (and the theatrical community) the meaning of the words “success,” and “community.”

## CHAPTER TWO THE WORKSHOP

Any play that can't be done with two chairs and one light bulb has something terribly wrong with it.

– Edward Albee

In October, 2010 I visited a cue-to-cue of Laurence Carr's *The Wakeville Stories* at SUNY New Paltz in upstate New York. Carr sat next to me during the cue-to-cue, which featured an upstage projection screen, a number of period-appropriate props (Post World War II/1940s), and actors in period-appropriate make-up and costumes. The actors were mostly off-book, though there were passages where scripts were in-hand. The scripts functioned as a kind of prop: when actors were passionate, they were flung to the ground; after rough, emotional moments, actors gingerly picked the scripts up again, as if they were precious. Outside of moments where the scripts were held, the play was so "fleshed-out," Carr turned to me and asked, "Do you think they could just call this a production?" In a way, it certainly was, since all of the elements had been brought together. There were two glaring differences which would mark this performance as a workshop or reading rather than a production: the first, the actors had the scripts in hand. The second was the inclusion of a strange, metaphysical character.

One of the performers was a seasoned actor and full professor, Joseph Paparone. Paparone, in a period-appropriate suit, was given the name "The Host." He read the stage-directions at the beginning of each of the four scenes. Paparone has a larger-than-life quality, and a strong but humble voice. For many of my students, he was the stand-out in the "production." However, unlike Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* where the stage-manager plays a pivotal role, "The Host" only existed for the purpose of the reading; in a full production, there would be no one at



all reading those lines. My students were surprised, as many of them felt that Paparone's presence was vital to the performance, and they were not sure the play would work without that character. Furthermore, with the use of props, lighting, music, sound effects, costume, make-up, etc., my students were convinced that the play had been produced, but the *concept* for the production was that of a staged-reading.

However, what they had actually witnessed was a "workshop production," a term that has emerged during the last thirty years. Perhaps the best working definition of a workshop production comes from Leroy Clark's *Writing for the Stage: a Practical Playwriting Guide*:

A workshop production is a very low-budget affair. Its purpose is to mount a production of the play with actors who are fully committed to the roles and perform the play in front of an audience and see how it works. During the rehearsal process, the playwright is able to do some rewriting and tweak the script here and there to improve it. The production values – sets, costumes, lighting, sound, and props – are minimal. Sometimes, the show is done in front of black drapes with stock furniture and props and basic lighting. (261)

There are a couple of important suggestions in this definition. The first is the description "very low-budget [emphasis added]," as it suggests minimal risk. If a small amount of money is put into a work, then the theatre may only charge a donation, or a much lower ticket price (if tickets are offered; some workshop productions offer a front-and-back photocopied program in lieu of a ticket and fully-realized program; such was the case with *Wakeville*). The other suggestion is that a work is not complete, as a playwright can perform "rewrites," and "tweak"-ing in order to "improve" the script (by whatever standards the theatre company feels the script needs improvement). Based on interviews with several playwrights, I can confirm that the "tweaking" of a script used to happen during the rehearsal process geared toward production (in particular, Sweet, Wright and Ferrante, raised this point). With the rise of developmental programs, reworking a script now occurs during developmental workshops, rather than rehearsals.

There are other concerns that emerge as well: by pairing the words “workshop” and “production,” the workshop becomes a *surrogate* for an actual production. The process, as I have stated earlier, is the product. The workshop production becomes the pinnacle of playwright success, creating further distance between emerging (as well as seasoned) writers and the opportunity to have a work fully mounted. Furthermore, because the workshop is a production, the expectations are created that the work is still in need of “fine tuning,” and, therefore, is not complete. The playwright assumes the position, consciously or not, of someone who needs further help with the work, and his or her own craft.

Another issue with the rise of the workshop and the workshop production is the role of rehearsal for a fully-mounted production. That is, the workshop production stands in for a full production, and the readings that lead up to a workshop production stand in for the rehearsal process. In a phone interview, Roland Tec, the Director of Membership for the Dramatists Guild of America, suggested that the workshop process has created an aesthetic that removes a sense of theatricality from the written word:

One of the dangers is that people start writing for readings. And the kind of writing that works well with a sit down reading is not the same kind of writing that works well with putting something on its feet. And I think we’re in danger of writing things that are in a very narrow kind of language. (Tec Interview)

Another contributing factor to this narrow aesthetic is the role of the audience for the workshop production. How does an audience process what it has seen? What are the material conditions that inform the staged-reading and the workshop production? An audience is already coded with a horizon of expectations, given their exposure to not only live theatre and performance, but other forms of narrative (movies, television, novels, etc.).

With all of these issues in mind, I want to move forward with the aim of showing how the model has become codified, and how it serves a particular group of interests. I do not want to

suggest that the workshop is not entirely without merit; it is my hope to show the “dream” workshop with the New York Writers’ Bloc in chapter four. I do, however, want to articulate the ways in which the workshop has become its own kind of animal, one that has diminished the value of the playwright, created a narrow aesthetic, and, in a way, has created its own codified audience. In short, the playwriting workshop has more-or-less become its own kind of phenomenon, and the workshop production its own kind of production experience.

## A BRIEF GENEALOGY OF THE WORKSHOP AND THE PLAYWRIGHT FUNCTION

In this section, I want to explore the creation of the workshop, and how notions of the workshop have changed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with an emphasis on how constitutive elements and outlooks have come to be, along with their implicit drawbacks or limiting assumptions. To this end, it is not my intention to give an exhaustive history, which could be a book unto itself. Rather, I want to consider a selective history that focuses on changes or innovations that have lead to our current understanding of the workshop. Because my goal is to bring this work up to twenty-first century assumptions, I am beginning my look with the development of the 47 Workshop. While my key concern is the ways in which plays are created for the American stage, I do want to consider institutional discourses around “workshop” as a functional model in order to evaluate how it is being used, how it is engendered (and by whom), and who immediately benefits from the various organizations that offer a workshop. From there, I will also contextualize how the playwright functions within the conditions of each workshop (the process) and workshop production or staged reading (product). As workshop productions and staged readings have acted as surrogates for fully mounted productions (which again, are the goal for playwrights in most developmental programs – that is, workshops geared toward the

text), I want to consider the institutional powers that control not only the ways in which works are produced (or not produced), but also the role of the writer, and who is ultimately served by the playwriting workshop.

To summarize this chapter, the playwright function has operated in the American theatre in the twentieth-century as a technician (“workshop”), a scientist (“laboratory”), a priest (“The Work”), and finally, a relic. The staged-readings provide haunted texts in coded (and often haunted) locations. The audience is then guided to diagnose and repair, as the readers are either seated behind a table, eyes downward (like doctors in an operating theatre), or as the readers sit at music stands, site of another kind of performance, with their (un)coded bodies being obstructed from view, giving the sense that something is missing. These ideological constraints are quite enough, even before the first page of text is read. Given these various problems, there needs to be a solution to the workshop/staged-reading that can allow for more theatricality when considering the role of the audience (which I will explore in chapter three).

Because it is my intention to highlight the construction of the American playwright as a by-product of the workshop process, I will not spend too much time with specific playwrights (each playwright could be a dissertation unto themselves). The exceptions are Eugene O’Neill, who marked the beginning of American-drama-as-literature, and a few playwrights from the radical sixties who attempted to break with tradition (and who were assimilated into the status quo).

## 47 Workshop

During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-centuries, theatre served to entertain mostly white, middle-class audiences. As Mark Holdin suggests, the turn of the twentieth century

marked “an emerging desire among the middle classes to move freely between a variety of entertainment venues and formats,” which included the serious theatre (melodramas, operas, etc.) and vaudeville. *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, which “detailed summaries of bills playing in New York City’s variety houses,” created a section that acknowledged vaudeville, but kept it distanced from the more “serious” theatre, in order to institute “the meaning of legitimate culture as a process of retreat from, and refusal of, the “lowbrow” (212). At the same time, a group of producers known as the Theatrical Syndicate “established a chain of thirty-three theatres in major cities which it booked under the condition that the production would play only in houses owned or booked by the Syndicate throughout its tour,” operated as a trust that kept a strong-arm over theatre production throughout America. Because of the rising division of “high art” and “low brow” in theatre, the conditions were being put in place that would create the need for a serious, literary theatre that operated outside of the immediate concerns of rampant commercialism (216-217).

During this time, George Pierce Baker was carving out the discipline of playwriting and theatre studies at Harvard University. It is with Baker that the idea of the workshop has its genesis. I am going to spend a moment discussing Baker’s working principles that helped shape the idea of the workshop, and how those practices still continue today. In Baker’s book, *Dramatic Technique* (1919), he discusses the ways in which a dramatist is unlike a novelist, stressing the importance of dramatic “action”:

Watch a child making his first attempt at playwriting. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the play will contain little except action. There will be slight characterization, if any, and the dialogue will be mediocre at best. The young writer has depended almost entirely upon action because instinctively, when he thinks of drama, he thinks of action. (21)

Here we have the first purpose of the American dramatist: creating action. The creation of action only serves to create “the shortest distance from emotions [characters] to emotions [audience]”

(21). Summarizing the second chapter, Baker states:

accurately conveyed emotion is the great fundamental in all good drama. It is conveyed by *action*, characterization, and *dialogue*. [...] It must be conveyed, not directly by the author, but indirectly by the actors. In order that the dramatic may become theatric in the right sense of the word, the dramatic must be made to meet all of these conditions successfully. [...] A dramatist must study the ways in which the dramatic has been and may be made theatric: that is what technique means. [emphasis added] (46)

The words “action” and “dialogue” would continue to haunt the playwriting workshop. As the words suggest, a “good” play relies on action, a throw-back to the formulaic approaches of Eugene Scribe (the well-made play), and Gustav Freytag (rising action, as articulated in his *Technique of Drama*). Baker’s reliance on the formula, or “technique,” codes “good drama” with formulas from the nineteenth century. This technique creates a single linear, character-driven aesthetic. Anything that does not meet these needs is not designated a “good drama.”

The second word, “dialogue,” suggests that action-driven plays (i.e., “good drama”) need to be achieved through the use of the spoken word. If good drama relies on the spoken word, then moments of heightened theatricality (including the presence of a silent body in space) would not meet the criteria. In short, Baker had already laid the ground, conscious or not, for works that may be better read rather than performed. While many of Baker’s thoughts on drama are antiquated (vis-à-vis number of pages, use of prologue and epilogue, creating an emotional response in the audience, etc.), it is still interesting to note that what he taught in his lectures would pave the way for the idea that a play is a “blueprint,” which relies on the interpretation of the actors and director. Because a written work is a “blue print,” it automatically assumes that there is a lack, and, in a way, the playwright’s needs become secondary to those of the director

and the actor. While Baker may not have consciously suggested the importance of the actor and director over the playwright, he did set in motion the chain of events that would lead to the workshop as a centerpiece for actors and directors (that is to say, other interests), rather than the script (and therefore the playwright).

Although Baker's approach is formulaic, Baker advocates a move away from the use of a tried-and-true formula once the playwright has learned the nuts-and-bolts of writing a script. Indeed, in the concluding moments of his 531-page book, Baker states, "The drama today [1919] is more flexible, more daring and experimental, than ever before" (520), which Baker champions, as dramatists move from creating general "dramatic" (i.e., formulaic) works to ones that are "more *unique* to what is peculiarly his own expression [emphasis added]" (521). In other words, crafting a "good drama" relies on an understanding of character, action, and dialogue. Once this technique is learned, a playwright (gendered-male) can then create a work that breaks away into its own unique form. Or, to put it in today's terms, once a playwright learns the rules, he is free to break them. However, with the 47 Workshop, Baker was more interested in technique than substance. Most of his students were reading Scribe and Sardou and creating "well-made plays." However, when (and by whom) is a playwright deemed ready to break the rules and move forward as an artist, and furthermore, who sets the criteria for when a play is ready for production? (This is another issue that becomes more apparent with the rise of the playwriting workshops).

What should also be considered is how the term "unique" becomes grounded in notions of representation (i.e., theatrical realism) (Kinne 105). As Wisner Payne Kinne notes in *George Pierce Baker and the American Theatre*:

For one of the most persistent doctrines expounded at the roundtable [47 Workshop offered in the English Department at Harvard University] was summarized in G.P.B's admonition, "Get your material from what you see about you." (105)

This mantra sent playwrights into the streets to act as journalists of a kind, as Edward Brewster Sheldon "spent hours on the North End Streets of Boston, sympathetically studying the labors of the Salvation Army lassies to salvage many a drifting derelict," and salvage the "first act of a play which Sheldon showed to [actress] Minnie Maddern Fiske" (105), a Broadway actor credited with introducing American audiences to the work of Henrik Ibsen (the "father" of dramatic realism). By pushing playwright-reporters to get the "real story," this journalistic approach to playwriting grounds "good drama" in realism, which had haunted the American stage since the nineteenth century. As William Demastes notes, George Henry Lewes, an English critic of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, argued that "theatre should be 'of representation, not of illusion, (representing) character with such truthfulness that it should affect us as real, not to drag down ideal character to the vulgar level'" (qtd. 13). Furthermore, with *The Law of the Drama* by Brunetière, published in America in 1914 (trans. William Archer):

Drama is a *representation* of the will of *man* in *conflict* with the mysterious powers or *natural* forces which limit and belittle us; it is one of us thrown living upon the stage there to struggle against fatality; against social law; against one of his fellow mortals; against himself if need be; against the ambitions, the interests, the prejudices, the folly, the malevolence of those around him [emphasis added]. (15)

I have highlighted the words "representation," "conflict," "man," and "natural." In this section, we see again that the best drama should be representation, dealing in the natural or empirical world (William Demastes uses the term "empirical" in order to suggest that Realism is a heightened form of Naturalism, which is agreeable (*Beyond Naturalism* 4-5)). Therefore, playwrights need to deal with the material world in front of them, and their plays serve as



surveys and reports of this world, structured with a formulaic technique, which includes conflict, action, and the use of dialogue to achieve these goals. Once a playwright learned this process, he would be ready to create a “good drama.” Or, as Baker would say to his graduating students, “Now that you have learned the techniques...you may someday find the material and the inspiration to write a good play” (qtd. Kinne 111).

With the public success of the 47 Workshop, Baker would continue to develop plays for production in class, and move toward actually producing the work, both at Harvard and through national tours, pageants, and a post-War tour in England. There have been few scholarly articles dealing with 47 Workshop, although Arvid Sponberg and Shannon Jackson have both contextualized the creation of the course vis-à-vis hetero-normative conceptions of theatre, and how the gendered-male rhetoric lead to scenic building and design as part of a class initially offered as a technique for writing plays (Jackson and Sponberg both argue that writing was deemed as a feminine activity). Earlier, I highlighted the word “man” from the passage by Brunetière. I will spend a few moments now to suggest why the creation of a masculine identity was important for the playwright function.

In her book, *Professing Performance*, Shannon Jackson traces the genealogy of the word “performance” and how the discourse that creates the word has changed in the academy. Jackson gives the account of how George Pierce Baker was able to carve out the study of theatre in the humanities in the early twentieth century, foregrounding how drama and theatre were born out of the discipline of elocution, that is, a discipline of charm school (63). As Arvid Sponberg has noted in his paper “How Playwriting Fared at Harvard – and Fled to Yale!”, (delivered at ASTR in 1995), “[t]here is some evidence...that Baker’s colleagues afforded him greater leeway for experimentation at Radcliffe because the education of women was considered as less important

than the education of men” (2). Therefore, Baker would have to justify the study of drama and playwriting using male-based rhetoric when proposing the class at Harvard.

Following the success of that class, Baker began allowing his male students to work on plays as well. By 1902, the class "English 47: The Technique of the Drama. Lecture and Practice" was offered at Harvard (9). In order to make the practice of studying drama, and specifically writing plays more masculine, the 47 Workshop (as it became known) "involved acting and *technical production* in the development of new plays" (Jackson 63). In other words, the female discipline of writing a drama was made male thanks to the use of tools and –paint – basic *manly* carpentry.

In short, in order to fare at Harvard, the discourse surrounding playwriting (or playwrighting) had to be engendered male: the rhetoric of “transcribing” the past, which would pave the way for the play as a “blue-print,” suggested the equally “manly” endeavor of architecture; the well-made-play *formula* suggests that plays fall into the realm of science, also a male practice; and the use of carpentry (hammering, nailing, and screwing) brought the various theatrical elements together in order to justify playwriting as a practical, male-gendered art. What this sets up for the playwright function in the twentieth century is that only men can be taken seriously as dramatists. Therefore, the playwright function has to be male.

While the teaching of drama and playwriting was being grounded in masculine rhetoric, the conditions of production were being created that would accept one of Baker’s students as a “serious” writer of dramatic literature. As mentioned earlier, with the overly ornate melodramas – such as those by the then-touted David Belasco – and Broadway theatre trusts of the early twentieth century, a number of theatre artists banded together to emulate the kind of work that was being performed in Europe, and in particular the West Bank in Paris – more like the brand of

realism endorsed by Baker at his workshop. The conditions were in place in order to call forward a literary saint of the stage to deliver Baker's masculine realism to the theatergoing masses, which is how Eugene O'Neill was able to emerge as America's first canonized author, leaving others, including Belasco, behind.

In "The Canonization of Eugene O'Neill," David Savran explores the rhetoric of the mission statements of the Little Theatres of the early twentieth century, in particular, the Provincetown Playhouse. Savran notes, "virtually all the young radicals seemed to believe they had a sacred calling, even if this calling was tied to a post-Nietzschean scepticism [*sic*] about established religion and (even) God" (565). Furthermore, "they sought an artist who would be a redeemer and savior" as "art came to substitute for God" (565). With the rise of vaudeville shows and musicals (that is, low art) during the turn of the twentieth century, the conditions for the need of a literary saint of the stage emerged. The intellectuals of the Little Theatre movement craved a central literary figure that could elevate the art of the stage into a religion. For Savran, their use of religious rhetoric provided the path for O'Neill's hasty inclusion as, arguably, the first member of the canon of modern American drama.

I have spent some time discussing the emergence of O'Neill because much of American playwriting (the way playwriting is taught, the workshop model, etc.) is directly tied to the *myth* of O'Neill. For example, the most visible playwriting workshop is the O'Neill Playwrights Conference which has calcified and become *the* developmental model. In a way, much of what follows Baker's program and O'Neill's success is an attempt to find "the next O'Neill," that is, the next viable and successful American playwright.

## New Dramatists and the Actors Studio

The next great installation of the workshop after George Pierce Baker was New Dramatists, who opened its doors in 1949. It was founded by Michaela O’Harra, and included a committee of visible writers: “Maxwell Anderson, Russel Crouse, John Golden, Oscar Hammerstein II, Moss Hart, Howard Lindsay, Elmer Rice, Richard Rodgers, Robert E. Sherwood, and John Wharton” (Wright *At Work and Play* 15). Like the 47 Workshop, the playwright at New Dramatists is engendered as male, this time using (metaphoric) “tools.” According to New Dramatists’ website:

New Dramatists is dedicated to the playwright, and pursues a singular mission: to find gifted playwrights and give them the time, space, *and tools to develop their craft*, so that they may fulfill their potential and make lasting contributions to the theatre. Regarded as a national leader in playwright support and advocacy, New Dramatists has remained a pioneer in the field of new play development since our inception in 1949. We offer our company of 50 playwrights a home base and self-guided laboratory for seven years, free of charge, in the company of a gifted community of peers. Writers pay nothing to join and participate in New Dramatists. The program is made possible largely through contributions *from the theatre and entertainment community*. In return for this gift of time and resources, resident playwrights write and create new works for the theatre. The company organizes an average of 90 readings and *workshops* of new plays and musicals by its playwrights each season [emphasis added]. (New Dramatists)

New Dramatists is constructed with the vocabulary created by Baker and 47 Workshop, offering terms such as “tools,” “workshops,” and “create new works” (rather than just “write new plays”). This vocabulary, gendered male, underlies the hidden ideology of New Dramatists, one that involves the use of “tools” and the idea of exchanging goods and services (“time” and “resources”) for work (“write” and “create”). In other words, the rhetoric is both male and *capitalist*. The playwrights that were being developed were meant to be working professionals, i.e., Broadway playwrights. However, New Dramatists was not (and still is not) a producing organization. Rather, though the plays developed there are expected to have a life beyond, there

are no systems in place to guarantee production. In short, with New Dramatists, as with the early years of the 47 Workshop, the process of writing was the product; the focus was on the writer developing his craft, rather than on a specific work being geared toward production (as mentioned, the focus would change with the 47 Workshop via tours, pageants, and productions).

New Dramatists incorporates capitalist phrasing, and notions of exchange value: that is, in exchange for “creating new works for the theatre,” playwrights are given the “gift” of “resources” (New Dramatists). While relying on contributions from a (nebulous) theatre and entertainment community (would “industry” be a better term?), the capitalist vocabulary that dominates the non-producing model should give a better understanding of how the playwright functions. The playwright *owes* the theatre industry new work. If the playwright does not create a satisfactory work (i.e., “good drama”), fault immediately falls on the playwright because, after all, he or she was given the “gift” of “resources.”

New Dramatists is still in operation today, and is actually quite an exclusive club (despite the claim that their “playwright company” consists of “emerging playwrights of talent and ability” (Wright 17)), with Artistic Director Todd London at the helm (London himself teaches at Yale as a lecturer in Theatre Management). Indeed, its ties to Yale via London suggest that the Yale method of creating drama (that is, the Baker “technique”) is still very much in operation. Indeed, this year the seven playwrights admitted to New Dramatists are Annie Baker, Daniel Beaty, Madeleine George, Sibyl Kempson, James McManus, Peter Sinn Nachtrieb, Betty Shamieh and Francine Volpe, all of whom have had regional or Off-Broadway visibility (Playbill.com). Members who have finished their seven-year residency include Anne Washburn and Stephan Ardly Guirguis. Although the working operations of New Dramatist are suspect, I do not intend to negate the works of the playwrights who have been accepted by New Dramatist,

or their contribution to American theatre. Their works are often quite vital and exciting (two are members of 13P, after all, who achieved mainstream success via productions with 13P- see chapter five); rather, I want to highlight the idea that if a playwright wants visibility (via the gift of membership), they need already to be visible. In short, the theatre industry today is still geared toward the aesthetics created by Baker at Harvard, and continued at Yale; or, in other words, the Ivy League creates the only legitimate theatre artists, and the primary aesthetic of the American drama is still more-or-less the well-made play, grounded in psychological realism.

While New Dramatists was forming, next door at the former Seventh Associate Presbyterian Church on 44<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City, the Actors Studio closed its doors to the world so professional actor-members could hone their skills in “Method” acting. The Actors Studio was created by Eliza Kazan, Robert Lewis, and Harold Clurman after the demise of The Group Theatre. The Group championed the Moscow Arts Theatre approach to acting, directing, and playwriting. For members of the Group, Stanislavski presented the best way to create emotional truth, and, therefore, good/representational drama. Prior to Stanislavski, empirical “imitation” was the root of effective acting. As David Krasner suggests, Stanislavski’s teachings (through the funnel of the Group Theatre) emphasized that the presentation of the “true self” resulted in “authentic [stage] behavior.” (26). Krasner’s justification for the sweep of psychological realism, and its hold over American theatre training during the twentieth century, has to do with how capitalist society engages with the individual impulses, over a broader sense of community justice:

It is only a slight oversimplification to say that the inner emotional real seems authentic to Americans. This view has powerfully shaped American life. With its rampant individualistic excess and absence of effective central control over hurly-burly capitalism, America has encouraged individual prosperity and personal inventiveness over social responsibility. (26)

Therefore, the Method pushes actors, writers and directors to dwell within the realm of the psychological ego, in order to serve the needs of the immediate self. While Krasner is speaking specifically of Method-acting, what I am highlighting is how Method-actor training married itself to the dramatic objective/action teachings of George Pierce Baker. If the purpose of Method-acting is to strip the subject/actor down to a raw “truth” or emotion, then the dramatic climax of a play has to be an explosion of that emotion, where the subject/actor can express individual/ego crises in full view of an audience in order to create a sense of “truth.” As a result, this kind of a climax does not necessarily ask for subtlety, or quiet reversals; rather, the climax becomes a kind of gesture that leads to emotional grandstanding, empty of social responsibility, empty of action. Furthermore, this system of American realism rejects some of the more avant-garde works of the early twentieth century, as well as the works of Shakespeare (Stanislavski had suggested that his System would not do any good for the Shakespearean actor; ironically, he begins *An Actor Prepares* with his “students” preparing to play the role of Othello). In short, the Method-playwright is stripped of aesthetic considerations, in order to create a world that showcases an actor’s ability to emote.

The other rhetoric surrounding “the Work” at the Studio echoes both the 47 Workshop and New Dramatists: the Studio members are offered “a unique opportunity to explore and improve their *craft* in a safe, *laboratory environment* [emphasis added]” (Actors Studio). What I would like to highlight here are the words “craft,” and “laboratory environment” Once again, the rhetoric is grounded in male disciplines of technology and science.

If O’Neill is the literary saint of the stage (as he stands as the first “canonized” American playwright), then the Actors Studio takes this notion of “sacred” a step further by operating in an old church. Furthermore, the way the room is laid out and used is coded with religious overtones:

Observing members are asked to sit in the balcony, and not to make any disturbance; members of the Actors Studio, and Working Finalists, are allowed to sit in the folding chairs (on bleacher-style risers), and may offer comments about the work being presented; the Actors Studio moderators act as priests, imparting wisdom to actors, directors, and playwrights, and the congregation members silently nod in agreement, while Observing members (not yet “confirmed”) look on.

Although the altar and the pews are no longer present, there is still the sense of Church atmosphere with how “The Work” is approached. Indeed, as the website states, “The Studio provides its members with [a] special kind of privacy, along with a group of colleagues who share the same passion for what Studio members refer to as “The Work” (Actors Studio). What is evoked here, especially since the Studio operates in an old church, is “The Word” of God. What is suggested (not too subtly) is that the Actors Studio is holy, and the one true way to create American theatre.

In sum, the Actors Studio keeps its doors closed to the world, and conducts its research in secret. The space is both sacred (formerly a church), and scientific (a laboratory) in which a select few may safely experiment (psychologically) in front of others in this elite club (congregation). The added of the sacred element suggests that this is the one true way to create American theatre, thereby not-so-much challenging, but ignoring any other approach as inadequate (i.e., “not good drama”).

Although the Actors Studio was primarily a unit for professional performers, it did offer a space for playwrights as well. Spearheaded in 1956 by Molly Kazan, the Playwrights Unit at the Actors Studio sought to develop the plays of professional working playwrights behind closed doors (Crespy 143). To be clear, “professional” referred to playwrights who had successful



productions on Broadway. In fact, a number of America's most noticeable playwrights from the late 1950s into the early 1960s were members of the Playwrights Unit (which would later be modified into the Playwright/Directors Unit), including Edward Albee, James Baldwin, William Inge, Arthur Kopit, Murray Schisgal, Clifford Odets, and later, playwrights such as Maria Irene Fornes (144). At the time of its inception, Lee Strasberg, the Artistic Director of the Actors Studio, had said, "The first responsibility of our theatre is therefore to the playwright – the living playwright. [...] But the living playwright must depend on the living actor. [...] In the union of actor and playwright lies the magic of theatre" (qtd. Crespy 143).

Crespy continues, "This statement was somewhat disingenuous," as Strasberg "was primarily a teacher of actors. Indeed, actors and directors eventually took direct control of the playwrights unit" which they still maintain today (143). However, I would argue that Strasberg was in no way trying to hide his ideology of an "actors first" theatre. After all, it is *the Actors Studio*; the very name makes the ideology explicit, and though I only selected a few key sentences from a much longer quote, I believe Strasberg wore his ideology on his sleeve. To put it another way, the Actors Studio foregrounds the question, "Who are the playwrights writing for, if not actors?" Therefore, the workshop does not operate in service of the script, but rather, the actors.

In his history of the Actors Studio, *A Method to their Madness: The History of the Actors Studio*, Foster Hirsch, on one hand, touts the Playwrights Unit for developing works such as "[Edward] Albee's *Zoo Story*, Michael Gazzo's *A Hatful of Rain*, and Tennessee Williams's *Night on the Iguana*," but then offers, on the other hand, that "it must be said that the Studio has not produced a significant American drama" (226). Furthermore, "the only play that might never have been written [if not for the Actors Studio] was *A Hatful of Rain*, which was developed,

piecemeal and through improvisation, on the premises – it's the only play that the Method directly gave birth to" (226). As Edward Albee would make a fast and ugly divorce with the studio, taking most of the Playwrights Unit with him, it is no wonder that the only play held up in Method-based glory is *A Hatful of Rain*. Other PU members at the time included Jack Gelber, whose most noted contribution was *The Connection*, one of the two major dramas produced by The Living Theatre, prior to their move to event-based social drama.

The Actors Studio's Playwrights Unit is now the Playwrights/Directors Unit. It has a smaller section dedicated to those who were students at the Actors Studio Drama School at New School University (1994-2005), and students and alumni of the Actors Studio Drama School at Pace (2005-Present), known as the Actors Studio's Playwrights/Directors Workshop. During meetings of the Playwrights/Directors Workshop, moderator Carlin Glynn continued the tradition of asking playwrights to bring their plays in on a scene-by-scene basis, building a script one step at a time. Jay Holtham, a member of the workshop, in general believes that he had a good experience during his two-year involvement, though he did highlight one concern:

I always felt there was a bit too much emphasis on the actors' process and that pushed plays too far along in their process, expecting a first or early draft to be able to answer questions that a final draft can. It's an admirable goal to involve actors and directors early and I believe that it's better for the play, but the "public" component complicates the process. Even though the presentations are in the workshop only, it was hard to avoid the feeling of a performance and turning a little too much (in my opinion) over into the hands of the actors and director as the playwright is still learning about his or her play. (Holtham)

As part of the play development process, the actors would drop the scripts and improvise based on the scene. If the scene was not clear, the blame fell immediately on the playwright for not creating a scene that could be easily, i.e., realistically and linearly, followed. To some extent, this suggests that the Studio believes that writing is an "outside process." Or,

as Hirsch proposes, “writing surely can never have a method the way acting can, and therefore the kind of group investigation that goes on in acting sessions is not automatically transferrable to a group of writers” (226). Though obviously defensive of the studio in this statement, Hirsch does contend that “writers were never made to feel a part of the Studio” (226). That unfortunate tradition continues today.

Although the Actors Studio did not make playwrights feel welcome, the model fostered at the Playwrights Unit – in which writers would bring in a section of work at a time, to be read by actors – served as the basis for three workshops that purported to be more writer-centered: The Albarwild Playwrights Unit, the O’Neill Conference, and the New York Writers’ Bloc. That is, although the Actors Studio situated the playwright function into an area of servitude, the approach of “building” a play scene-by-scene is still used today in the academy and in professional workshops. One of these workshops, the New York Writers’ Bloc, will be discussed thoroughly in chapter four.

## Radical Sixties

In the previous sections, I located the playwright function in the rhetoric of carpentry, capitalism, and religion. I argue that the rhetoric surrounding the construction of the playwright goes hand-in-hand with the development of the playwriting workshop model. With the emergence of Off-Off Broadway, the 1960s brought changes in workshop methods and attitudes towards the playwright and production. In this section, I am going to look at the next phase of the workshop model, and consider how the workshop continued to construct the playwright, and the notion of good drama.

During the emergence of the Off-Off Broadway scene (“the beat poetry scene”; a “scene for playfulness, amateurism, irresponsibility, incompetence”), the production apparatus behind the likes of La Mama, Caffè Cino, the Judson Poets, and other “public theatres” did more “to stand the new playwright of the decade on his feet than have the workshops and showcases” (Pasolli 151-152). Some of these spaces were also accidental, or illegal. Such was the case with Caffè Cino. As Wendell C. Stone suggests, Joe Cino “never planned on operating a theatre; but the play readings and scene work that he allowed friends and patrons to offer became so popular that he soon found himself offering a new play every week or two” (14). Stone concludes:

Ultimately, Joe Cino’s method for selecting works relied less on what the artist had to say than on the fact that the artist had something to say and nowhere to say it because of inexperience, choice of subject matter, or age. As a result, the Cino was not guided by an overarching political philosophy, artistic concept, or box-office strategy, but by the needs of its artists. The dictum that ruled was Cino’s phrase, “Do what you have to do.” And what it seems that the Cino crowd had to do was to create theatre. (14)

Cino’s methodology is a marked break with the aesthetic streamlining of previous spaces for readings and workshops. At the Cino, there was not a sense of “highbrow” or “lowbrow.” There was just art, created by artists doing “what they have to do.”

Along with the seedier elements of the Cino (roaches, poor electricity, a terrible smell), the space was one that lacked any notion of sacred, but one of joyous secrecy. Cino “operated without a [cabaret or theatre] license” thereby “often resulting in legal action from the police, fire, and health departments” (Stone 15). It was from these down-and-out, illegal, and gritty cafes and coffee houses that Edward Albee, Richard Barr, and Clinton Wilder sought out playwrights that were gritty, street-smart, artistically gifted, and crass.

As noted earlier, Edward Albee left the Studio’s Playwrights Unit having felt that playwrights were treated poorly. With the success of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* on

Broadway, however, Albee would create a unit of his own with Broadway producers Clinton Wilder and Richard Barr. The Playwrights Unit of Theatre 63 (corresponding to the year of its creation) was an Off-Off Broadway development and production organization housed at the Cherry Lane theatre on Minetta Lane in downtown Manhattan (Pasolli 150-151). In his article, "A Paradigm for New Play Development: The Albee-Barr-Wilder Playwrights Unit," David Crespy notes:

Because of the initiatory nature of much of Albee's work, and because Albee did this experimentation in full public view on Broadway with little or no apology, the idea that American playwrights deserved a forum in which to learn and take risks in full (but perhaps controlled) public view was central to the Albee-Barr-Wild producing philosophy. (31)

Albee's success on Broadway led Barr to contend that "the playwright and the play are the unifying elements of any theatrical production" (31). As the moderator of the ABW, Albee pushed writers to "do what you don't know you can do," echoing Cino's "Do what you have to do" (Crespy "Paradigm" 32). Because of this "do what you have to do" mantra, coupled with the other movements of the radical sixties, the playwright of the sixties was seen as a brooding avant-gardist, one shrouded in American myth and mystery. Pasolli describes a playwright friend, Jerome Max, as "largely self-educated, witty, poor, and unhappy," situating him within the larger realm of "beat" culture during the late 1950s into the early 1960s (150-152). Other American myth-makers involved with the Unit include Sam Shepard, Lanford Wilson (a featured playwright at Caffè Cino), and Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka, whose *Dutchman* was written at the Unit).

The writers who participated with the "Albarwild" (the name Crespy gives to the Playwrights Unit of Theatre 63) were wild and experimental. Furthermore, the works that were developed were actually produced at Cherry Lane. However, the writers were also groomed to

meet commercial aesthetic standards. As Robert Pasolli argues the objective of the Albee Unit was “an attempt to institutionalize the Albee phenomenon: the Playwrights Unit of Theatre 63 (now Theatre 69) was founded by Albee's producers in hopes of locating and developing other comers like him” (151). Pasolli continues: “Functioning as a producing theatre rather than a workshop, this Unit is essentially a professional showcase where finished work by unestablished writers can be seen by the members of the commercial establishment” (Pasolli 151). In short, the unit existed to “find the next Albee,” a young “hot” playwright who could be the next commercial (i.e., Broadway) success. As the writer was performing the role of myth-making (i.e., a constructed American identity), the producers were looking to capitalize on their works (an American reality). In short, the Unit was looking for new, hot (i.e., “low financial risk”) playwrights, who were mined from the various performing venues – Caffè Cino, Judson Poets, etc.,-- and cultivated for a commercial audience (Crespy *Off-Off Broadway Explosion* 18). The playwright was groomed by producers for an audience (and hopeful investors for a move to Broadway), the way the playwright had been used by the Playwrights Unit to provide fodder for actors. Although the playwrights were pushed artistically, it was still, for the producers at least, a capitalist venture.

The sixties began with a feeling of experimentation, spurred by a need for social change, and therefore, a social drama that moved, ultimately, beyond the perceived notion of playwright and script. In this respect, the playwright can be viewed as conservative, unless writing for and with groundbreaking groups such as The Living Theatre and The Open Theatre. However, as Leslie Wade notes:

By the late 1960s, the experimental theatre would exhibit signs of a growing self-consciousness (some would say decadence). In short, forces of canonization

began to act upon the movement, and Off-Off Broadway found itself enmeshed in the entertainment business and the institutions of public culture. (30)

Drama critic Robert Brustein concurs, stating “I look back on this age as a period of self-absorption, one which left a permanent imprint our stage. Radical theatre had turned into a mode of institutionalized narcissism where the self-indulgent fantasies of directors and actors were often being substituted for the intentions of the play” (3). Brustein faults directors, such as Peter Brook, and others who incorporated a “production apparatus” that was “replacing, rather than reinforcing, the playwright’s function” (3). Here we see the beginning of what Hans-Thies Lehmann would call the postdramatic theatre, one that relied on the auteur, rather than the author. It should be telling that Brustein titled this piece of criticism “More Masterpieces,” as an outright rejection of Artaud’s manifesto and a championing of the authorial (playwright) voice, as “the emphasis had begun to fall on the gesture rather than the word, on physical rather than vocal projection” (3). In other words, the playwright function was called into question, as it created narratives that could be considered conservative, given the emphasis on ritual and the non-structured performances of The Performance Garage, The Wooster Group, Judson Poets, and later, the work of Robert Wilson and the Byrd Hoffman School of Birds.

With each of the playwriting workshop models offered so far, the playwright’s needs are secondary: for the Actors Studio, the playwright served the (sacred) actor and his Work. For the “Albarwild,” the gritty, downtown playwright was groomed by producers in the hopes of “finding” the next commercial success (i.e., the next Albee). The process-centered model of the Actors Studio, with the production mechanism of the Albarwild model, would influence that most visible of workshops, the Mecca for playwrights, the O’Neill Conference in Connecticut, a model which would in turn replicate and spread throughout regional and not-for-profit theatre in the United States.

## O'Neill Conference

The O'Neill Playwrights Conference is perhaps the most visible of the playwriting workshops, standing as both the inheritor of the historical tradition and the present-day status quo. In this section, I will first consider the circumstances which created the context for the emergence of the O'Neill. I will then identify and define the O'Neill's operations and assumptions, and how it is ideologically and institutionally tied. My intention is to foreground the operations of the workshop that have historically arisen and have become calcified at the O'Neill.

In *The Humana Festival: The History of New Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville*, Jeffrey Ullom gives a concise history of the regional theatre. Margo Jones, "considered the creator of the regional theatre movement," for many "symbolized the beginning of the decentralization of the American Theatre from the East Coast (specifically New York City)" toward a theatre that embraced the plurality of the United States. As Ullom notes, Jones's book, *Theatre-in-the-Round*, published in 1951, serves as both a history of the early regional theatre movement, as well as "a how to for developing regional theatre" (7). Interesting to note is that the earliest regional theatre, the Alley in Houston under Jones, employed amateur actors at first; gradually, the regional theatre shifted toward using professional actors (as amateur actors were "questionable [in] reliability and quality") who were often brought in (more than likely, from New York City), causing the initial rift between the structure of the regional theatre and its community (this is a point I will return to in chapter five while discussing Axial Theatre) (11).

A second concern Ullom highlights is the role of regional theatre – "did it exist simply to bring theatre to the masses or did these institutions have a responsibility to challenge their



audiences and present culturally relevant work?” (9) Ullom concludes that a regional theatre should work toward “both goals, and thus the lesson learned by most regional theatres in their earliest years was the value of balance” (9).

Finally, there is the issue of space: the Alley operated in a number of locations before building a home theatre. While it operated without a permanent performance space, the Alley relied on “found spaces” in order to present new work. This “found space” approach is akin to the Off-Off Broadway model, in which any space could be used as a site of performance.

Because regional theatres grew throughout the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, there was an interest in new plays. During this time, universities began offering MFAs in playwriting. Because of this trend toward new plays, a number of regional theatres would merge with academic institutions:

Perceiving universities as culture centers ripe for the arts, numerous amateur (and later, professional) theatres aligned themselves with academic institutions for financial and creative support, accepting lessened financial risks at the expense of often working with amateur actors or educational mission statements. The most notable theatres to thrive under this formula are the McCarter Theatre (associated with Princeton University and becoming Equity in 1972), and Yale Repertory Theatre (obtaining professional status in 1972 also). (11)

Because of the role of the university in developing new plays (as we have seen with Baker’s 47 Workshop), and the interest stirred by the rise of the regional theatre, the conditions were ripe for a playwrights’ conference to emerge on the American theatrical landscape.

In *Playwriting At Work and Play*, Michael Wright gives an historical account of the O’Neill, locating three phases between its inception in 1968 and the publication of Wright’s book in 2004. Wright notes:

The Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center was originally established in 1964 by George White as a way of preserving the Hammond family buildings from the Waterford Fire Department, which planned to burn them down for fire practice (25)

One of the buildings in particular, the Monte Cristo Cottage, was “the setting for *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and *Ah, Wilderness!*” (25). The evocation of O’Neill’s name suggests that O’Neill is a national treasure, and therefore the buildings must be preserved. They must also be used in some way that continues the legacy of Eugene O’Neill. The rhetoric of preservation, and preservation of legacy, further constructs the legacy of O’Neill as that of a Saint. Therefore, the ground that O’Neill once lived on is hallowed, and those who work in his shadow are followers of his religion.

Although the center was first used by Jose Quintero who did “experimentation with process that were the foundation for what eventually became the O’Neill approach” in 1965, the O’Neill Conference did not begin formally until the leadership of Lloyd Richards in 1968 (25). This marks the first phase of the O’Neill, which ended when Richards resigned in 1999 (25-36). This phase was followed by the leadership of James Houghton (1999-2003), and then came the third phase, which involves two artistic directors, and the re-evaluation of the role of the O’Neill Playwrights Conference (36-53). To summarize, since its inception the O’Neill Conference has situated itself as “the place” that establishes playwrights as professionals, but this claim is problematic at best. First of all, the name “O’Neill Conference” suggests two things: 1. All playwrights who enter the conference wish to be the next O’Neill, and 2. O’Neill himself would want it this way. Playwrights who enter the O’Neill – and the vast majority of playwrights hopeful of becoming “established” spend \$35 a year trying to get accepted into the O’Neill – are immediately being trapped in a web of legacy.

The roster of O’Neill playwrights during Richards’s tenure is quite impressive. As Caroline R. Raymond states in her article/interview with Richards, “Through this venue, Richards helped further the careers of such dramatists as John Guare (1966-1968), David Henry

Hwang (1979), and Wendy Wasserstein (1977). It was also the Conference that began Richards's now legendary collaboration with August Wilson” (9). Richards was also Dean at the Yale School of Drama from 1979 until 1991 (9). Once again, there is the George Pierce Baker/Eugene O’Neill connection, suggesting a one-true-way to create the work. Both Yale, where Baker was invited to start the Yale School of Drama in 1926, and Eugene O’Neill evoke a sense of a sacred American dramatic technique, which have haunted previous incarnations of the playwriting workshop. With the two legacies melded at the O’Neill Conference, a playwright’s status as a canonized American dramatist is more-or-less solidified.

Richards himself (who passed away in 2006) was a notable director who came to the fore with the Broadway production of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959. When asked about his development process, Richards suggests that he was interested in the nature of a theatre “ensemble,” with an eye toward the meaning of a written work:

Well, I try to find out the playwright's intent even when sometimes he doesn't know himself. Not that the playwright can define his intent, but that's my job. I consider it my job to find out what he was about. Now if I'm working in the development of a play, then I try to get as close to that and to an understanding of it as I can, so that I really know what he's trying to say. What I'm trying to put onstage is whatever I divine that playwright was saying through his work, and I try to manifest that on the stage. And that's my goal and that's my style. How one manifests that intent can vary by your understanding of that and what you bring to that-but that's my job. (qtd. Sanders 17)

Richards’s approach to revisions of the text is also very diplomatic, as he articulates below when describing his long-time collaboration with playwright August Wilson:

I have an approach, an attitude, that I am the director and he is the playwright. And that means that he writes the lines, and I direct them. Now that doesn't mean that I can't suggest things to him or provoke things from him or expose to him where things may not be going right, but I don't write for a playwright. I have for a couple, I think. I was once talking with August [Wilson] about a scene where the end of it was not working properly. I said if you had a line like-and I said it-and I said something like that. And he said, "That's it. That's the line." I said, "Are you sure?" Because I don't want that responsibility. That was not my job. I want

the playwright, as I want the actors, to know it's their own. It's theirs, not mine.  
(19)

While the quotes above suggest that the O'Neill Conference should be a playwright's best daydream for new play development. However, there are a number of inherent problems with this model, including the talk-back session (a point I shall return to).

The O'Neill Conference, according to Richards, was democratically run without commercial pressure or concerns:

I had a rule at the conference, which was that agents could come up and see the work, but no one could negotiate with a playwright until two weeks after the conference was over. I once found an agent negotiating with a playwright or trying to get his play at the conference and I banned him from the conference. Because what that does is it sets up among the playwrights a competitive air and that was just what I was destroying. (21)

However, the O'Neill has been shrouded in controversy since Richards's retirement. The O'Neill, starting in 1968, had a blind-submission process, where reader/evaluators would pass works along to Richards that had (literary) merit, and Richards would then decide which plays/playwrights to invite for the week-long conference. However, in recent years, the question of access to the O'Neill has been raised by both The Dramatists Guild and individual playwright/producers.

In the September 2009 e-News Blast from The Dramatists Guild, Roland Tec took issue with the inclusion of the phrases "Open Submission" and "democratic process" in an email from the O'Neill, which had been sent to playwrights who had submitted (and been rejected) in previous years. Tec takes issue with the language the O'Neill uses, which he quotes:

The O'Neill's Open Submission process is unique in the field of developing works for the stage, requiring neither agent submission nor previous experience. This commitment *to a truly democratic process* has led to great discoveries of new artists and works, now iconic in American theater. (qtd. Tec)

Tec explains:

It is an open secret in the theatre world that of the dozen or so slots available each July, all but two or three are spoken for long before the first \$35 check has cleared. Established producers with major clout routinely lobby the upper echelons of the O'Neill staff for a slot in what has become to new plays what Sundance is to independent film—a ravenously scrutinized stepping stone on the path to commercial success. (Tec)

He concludes, “If the O'Neill wants to be the launching pad for the next season of commercially produced new work (...) instead of turning to impoverished writers for \$35 apiece, they ought to be charging the producers a hefty placement fee” (Tec). Another issue for Tec is that playwrights still submit their plays at a \$35 fee (not to mention the cost of mailing three hard copies of the script and a CD-R with additional information), because if a playwright does somehow manage to be accepted into one of the two coveted slots, his or her career as a playwright is more-or-less cemented. Bob Jude Ferrante, whose company Sanctuary:

Playwrights Theatre will be discussed in chapter four, offered the following:

The O'Neill became irrelevant when the original founders retired. When Lloyd Richards retired, that was the end of the O'Neill, even though my friend Jim Houghton took it over. He only lasted like a year and a half before they picked a woman who is an insider there. I forget her name. It's completely irrelevant. Unless you're an established playwright, they're not interested in you. Unless they call you up. The submission pile is a dodge and a fundraising effort. They read those scripts (maybe), but they certainly cash those thirty-five dollar checks. It's absolutely insulting. I used to submit to them back in the day. I stopped when the new people took over, because I could see what they're doing. (Ferrante Interview)

In short, the O'Neill now chooses its participants via “back door deals” that Richards would not have considered. However, despite the lack of access to the O'Neill, the O'Neill still functions as the pinnacle of playwright acceptance and visibility within the present theatre industry.

While a number of successful (i.e., Broadway, Off Broadway and regional) playwrights owe a debt to the O'Neill, the O'Neill approach to new play development is problematic: during

the Quintero days, plays were produced, but on a very strict schedule; actors needed to be "off-book in four days, so there could be very little revision of the text as it neared performance" (Anderson 63). When Lloyd Richards took over direction of the conference in 1968, he created the model of the workshop that has memetically spread and is currently propagating throughout the country today: the workshop production (as mentioned in earlier, this is a stripped down production, with minimal design/tech, and with actors holding scripts in hand). With these "productions," as Douglas Anderson reports, "memorization is not allowed...sets are composed of a stock collection of blocks and doors." The focus is on the revision of the text (i.e., the dialogue) (63).

Anderson notes that the "O'Neill system" promotes the idea that when it comes to developing a new work, "massive input is helpful," "massive on the spot rewriting improves a text," and "directors can be randomly assigned to texts and respond to them with creativity and insight," along with the most scandalous idea "that a public debate with audiences and a wide array of conference members is valuable" (64). The first point, that "massive input is helpful," will be contextualized in a later section of this study, "Developmental Hell." The third point, that "directors can be randomly assigned" highlights another problem with the workshop model: its tendency to assume that any playwright can fit with any director. Creativity, chemistry between the two functions, etc., cannot be considered. It is good enough to have one member with the label of "playwright" and another who has the label of "director" mixed together in order to ensure "good drama." Furthermore, the "poor" workshop process can't begin to consider "visual imagery and "movement" as the focus is on the text (dialogue);" and finally, during the feedback sessions the playwrights made "choices to please everybody; [plays] became linear," while a play that is experimental "doesn't stand a chance" (64-65). In other words, at the O'Neill Center, as

at the 47 Workshop, New Dramatists, and the Actors Studio, dialogue becomes the most important factor in creating “action,” and the realistic representation of well-made-action, is the one true way to create good drama. As a result, the most detrimental aspect of the O'Neill Conference (and developmental workshops that model themselves after O'Neill) is that plays “start to look like other plays” (65).

The O'Neill model, unlike New Dramatists, the Playwrights Unit at the Actors Studio or the Albarwild, is one that is focused on the development of the play, rather than the single author. The problem with this model is that it does not allow for much in the way of individual creativity, as a system (in the shadow of O'Neill, and therefore, George Pierce Baker's *Dramatic Technique*) is in place that favors one style over another. In other words, technique comes first, and an author's uniqueness is only found in the limited number of ways that a script may be different in its use of representational dialogue. Due to the success of the O'Neill, the notions of “good drama” have spread as regional theatres have attempted to replicate it as a working model, in order to capitalize on its visibility/success.

### Conclusions for the O'Neill

With the O'Neill, American realism is synonymous with the theatrical mechanics that create something more akin to reader's theatre than production-ready works. That is, the process is the product. Playwright Steven Dietz's essay “Developed to Death,” quoted at length by Michael Wright, suggests:

The staged reading has become its own form, completely distinct from the theatre as we know it. [. . .] Many of these plays, viewed later in full production (usually in the midwinter slot of a subscription season) do not begin to match the magic of their script-in-hand predecessors. The reason is simple. Our playwrights have, with the adaptability of cockroaches, learned to write brilliantly to fit the form –

and in today's theatre, more often than not, the given form is not production, it is the staged-reading. (qtd. Wright xv)

Dietz continues, "the demands of a full dramatic event [. . .] will never be codified to fit a workshop," and furthermore, "writers should be grappling with the limits of production, not development" (qtd. Wright xv). This quote echoes concerns stated by Roland Tec at the beginning of this chapter.

However, there are scholars who feel differently. In David J. Eshelman's 2011 article, "The Art of the New-Play Reading: Legitimacy and the New Play Showcase," Eshelman argues that universities have created a situation where productions are valued at the expense of readings, and, furthermore, public readings are "public performances of aesthetic texts and as important opportunities for generating a diversity of playwright voices" (75). Furthermore, he counters that universities in particular create a "*telos*" which lead to productions, therefore negating the role of the new play showcase/ new play reading (75). However, what Eshelman does not take into account are the questions of narrowing aesthetics, and ultimately, who ends up being served by the public readings. By suggesting that the playwright voice is the primary focus of a reading, what Eshelman is actually suggesting is dialogue *as* playwright voice.

Eshelman further argues that playwrights "truly crave *performance*, not necessarily *production*" (78). If playwrights are trained to view a reading as an "art object," they can achieve artistic happiness as "the shape of the performance is less important than the performance itself" (78-79). While I certainly agree that readings are an important of the process, the public reading, geared toward a single play (dialogue), shapes the aesthetic of American drama to feature a small cast, heavy dialogue, little motion, and therefore, narrative realism. I also am not suggesting that realism is ultimately an aesthetic problem: after all, there are a number of truly remarkable plays which follow American realism. However, asking playwrights to consider *performance* as the



endpoint for a play, is also asking too much. Eshelman assumes a singular notion of success (“performance,” i.e., “reading”) which he attempts to impose on playwrights. Readings-as-success provides a very limiting view of the possibilities for playwrights, one that attempts (consciously or not) to squelch any anarchistic tendencies within the writing community. In short, what is advocated by Eshelman is more-or-less an excuse for developmental hell, which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Although I am offering a passing glance at the O’Neill conference (after all, Wright, London and Anderson have covered the territory), it is important to note that the O’Neill model has been replicated at regional theatres around the country. The workshop geared toward the script, rather than the writer, ultimately fails in-so-far as it does not allow for deviations from the in-place system. The system is the echo of Baker’s 47 Workshop, one that champions a well-made-technique, grounded in the playwrights’ journalistic experiences. It is therefore grounded in psychological realism, gendered male via the rhetoric of science and technology, and with the rhetoric of tradition and preservation, it has become a true method for creating new work. The playwright function is essentially that of a priest, spreading the Word.

In the following chapter, I will consider how the rise of the workshops has created what playwrights call “developmental hell.” I will consider the impact of developmental hell on the playwright function, the aesthetic of the American drama, and the canon of American plays. I will end by asking scholars to reconsider notions of the American canon to include local theatre events.

### CHAPTER THREE DEVELOPMENTAL HELL AND THE AMERICAN CANON

The reading with audience is something the theater is doing for their own reasons that don't have anything really to do with me. I can appreciate that they need to do it, but it irks me that they say it is for my benefit.

—Anonymous Playwright, Quoted by Dower in “The Gates of Opportunity”

One of the key concepts that I have highlighted is the construction of “good drama” via the playwriting workshops of the twentieth century, which dictates both the aesthetic standards of the American play, and furthermore, which plays are worthy of canonization. The workshop model, and the works that are canonized, limit the artistic palette of the American playwright, and the model calcifies the methodology of the American playwright to include not just one, but a series of workshops which will gave the play shape until it is worthy of a workshop production, or in the best-case scenario, production itself. Production and concert readings are two very different animals.

One of the guiding points of a production is the way in which the play encounters an audience. For the production, the audience is engaged either emotionally or intellectually (or in a best-case scenario, both intellectually and emotionally). With a play-reading, the audience is given a duty: after all, if they are not there for a production, what are they there for? And if there is a talk-back session after a reading, what are the expectations placed on an audience? Furthermore, what does an audience expect to gain from a talk-back session? Finally, since a number of regional theatres offer developmental programs with staged-readings rather than never culminate in a production, whose interests are truly being served? How is a playwright supposed to navigate through the culture of constant development?

In this chapter, I will consider the ideological constraints of the regional theatre and its developmental programs to highlight how the dysfunctional system of new play development, known to playwrights as “developmental hell,” has become calcified. I will touch briefly on questions of access to the regional theatre, such as the emergence of the National New Play Network, which, in the name of creating opportunities for playwrights is further limiting opportunities for playwrights who are not already visible. I will then consider the role of the audience in a workshop reading: how it brings a horizon of expectations that is ultimately let down and is placed in the role of diagnostician, looking for a problem to be solved within the play-text. I will then move to an analysis involving the production of *The Cherry Sisters Revisited*, which served its time in developmental hell before actually being produced, as a test-case for the success of the workshop process, focusing on the questions: does constant development actually serve a play? Will the developmental circuit lead to plays that are, for lack of a better term, of quality? From there, I will open the conversation, to consider the ways in which the canon can be reconstructed or rethought, in order to allow for a plurality of aesthetics, thereby freeing the playwright from ideological and aesthetic constraints.

## REGIONAL THEATRE AND DEVELOPMENTAL HELL

As suggested in chapter two, the late 1960s and 1970s witnessed an explosion of new development and production. Aided by grants from the Rockefeller Foundation (and later, the Ford Foundation), a number of regional theatres created second-stage programs which featured new works, including “the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre’s ‘Theatre for Tomorrow’ program [and] the Mark Taper Forum’s ‘New Theatre for Now’ series” (Ullom 39). As Jeffrey Ullom notes, the Actors Theatre of Louisville, which became *the* place for new play production during

the 1970s, featured “a ‘Broadway’ season of more conventional works and an ‘Off-Broadway’ season in the smaller theatre that featured avant-garde and contemporary performances” (39).

Because of the decentralization of theatre during the 1960s, by the 1970s Broadway lost its place as *the* American theatre. As Jackson R. Bryer notes in *The Playwright’s Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists*, “of the six plays awarded the Pulitzer Prize” during the 1960’s (with the note that no awards were given in 1963, 1964, 1966, and 1968), “only one (*The Great White Hope*) originated on Broadway” (xii). Furthermore, during the 1970s “only one (Albee’s *Seascape*) of the eight plays” honored (with no plays awarded in 1972 or 1974) began on Broadway: “Three (*No Place to Be Somebody*, *That Championship Season*, and *A Chorus Line*) began at Joe Papp’s New York Shakespeare Festival, while all the other were first produced at regional theatres” (xii). Bryer concludes:

Whereas during the 1940s and 1950s, and into the 1960s, most New York-bound plays and musicals had gone through a ritual of out-of-town tryouts [...], now good new American plays could and frequently did originate all over the country, often in small theatres that did not present them with a Broadway production in mind, but rather as part of their own subscription seasons. (xii)

To summarize, while regional theatres began by producing classic or established plays, with time, new plays were being developed and produced as part of the regular season. As Leslie A. Wade notes in *Sam Shepard and the American Theatre*:

The 1970s revealed the American theatre as a decentralized theatre whose myriad energies found expression on the stages of regional, university, and community theatres. Original work at this time gained new prominence as many theatres sought to discover and nurture new voices. (76)

This focus on “original” and “new” helped to create the regional agenda of finding new playwrights, and new works for the stage. As noted earlier, the act of “finding the new play” would spin out of control, leaving many playwrights with new works, and little opportunity for production. However, the 1970s saw an explosion of new works, developed under the workshop

model that was calcified with the Actors Studio and the O'Neill. As a result, a number of the works look similar, and all were grounded in American realism (Anderson 65). By stating that works that go through developmental processes end up looking similar, I am not trying to negate the quality of the work, rather to suggest that by the 1970s, plays were being geared toward expectations of “good drama” in development programs across the United States.

By the 1980s, there were so many programs offering developmental “help” to new plays, what became explicit was the idea that a play *needed* to participate in a workshop before being considered for a production on the professional (Regional, Off-Broadway, and occasionally, Broadway stage) (Anderson 82). A formula for new play development had become calcified.

This “formula” for new plays, as noted, was the process-as-product featured in the working methodologies of New Dramatists, the Actors Studio’s Playwrights Unit, and The O’Neill Conference. As more corporate funding found its way into new play development and production, regional theatres were taking fewer aesthetic risks, cementing the aesthetic of “good drama” for the U.S. theatre.<sup>1</sup>

As suggested in the previous chapters, the workshop model, which has proliferated throughout the American theatre, has championed a single aesthetic, and has operated often at the artistic expense of the playwright function. I am going to take a few pages to discuss the proliferation of the workshop model, and situate how the playwright functions (or does not function) within this apparatus. In order to maintain to be regarded as “grant friendly”, many regional theatres offer either festivals of new works, or staged-readings by emerging authors. As

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<sup>1</sup> In 2009, corporate grants for most LORT theatres accounted for 4.3% of the total budget (*Theatre Facts 2009* 28). While the low corporate giving suggests a step away from the early days of the decentralization of theatre, the modes of operation for many of these theatres has become calcified. As many theatres seek to attract individual donors (just over 11% of the budget), the aesthetic of the drama has become neutralized as a means of keeping the theatre grant-friendly. See TCG’s *Theatre Facts 2009* for the full financial report.

a result, the reading/workshop has become a kind of regional theatre animal that pays lip service to new work without giving the play a full production. This has paved the way for what is often referred to as “developmental hell.”

Developmental hell is the process in which a script is brought through various workshops with different theatre companies (and therefore, different audiences), and is changed accordingly (as, with the O’Neill model, “massive input is helpful,”) but without a production. While a reading before one audience may create a healthy dialogue between the playwright and his-or-her community, a series of readings create a scenario which is akin to “test audiences” in the movie industry. That is, each audience brings with it its own horizon of expectations, its own aesthetic preferences, and its own coded notions of community, which then operate to “fix” the conventions of the script which do not immediately meet the community’s needs. While there have been plays that are canonized and anthologized which suggest a universal appeal (a point I will return to), I argue that a play cannot be written for a “general audience” because American does not have a single national theatre. Furthermore, Hollywood films are shown around the country (and the world) in various theatres, while a play is produced for one live audience at a time.

In “The Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development in America,” Douglas Anderson looks at the decentralization of theatre as the starting point for the new play development phenomenon that has memetically propagated for over fifty years. Specifically, Anderson notes how the decentralizing of theatre actually backfired. That is, by attempting to move theatre away from the myth of New York, regional theatres, such as the Alley and Actors Theatre of Louisville, which had originally showcased local talent/professionals, started creating works with an eye toward New York (Broadway), while relying on grants from individuals,

national endowments, and corporate sponsors. With corporations stepping in to lend their names to the arts (a prime example is the Humana Festival, bearing the name of a large insurance company, which supports new works at the Actors Theatre of Louisville through grants that serve as tax-deductions), what could be considered a worthy American play has also been altered in order to ensure (an ethical) responsibility for the needs of the corporation, as well as the stockholders and the corporate consumers. As Bob Jude Ferrante, the Managing Director of Sanctuary: Playwrights Theatre has noted, “Risk is the enemy of anyone who runs an organization” (Ferrante Interview). In other words, what the regional developmental programs have added to the growing list of problems with the workshop is a process of sanitation, so as not to anger audiences (individuals), administrators of national endowments (federal funding), corporate sponsors, and their consumers.

Jeremy Cohen, the recently appointed Artistic Director of The Playwrights Center in Minneapolis, argues that regional theatres are in fear of losing their subscriber-base, which constitutes (mostly) an older audience that may be put off by new works and new aesthetics:

I think where we’re at right now is development is all good, but we need productions right now. We’ve got to get on regional theatres and push them through their fears of producing new works, because if we don’t we’re going to let [issues of] money be the dying out of great new theatrical work, and we can’t let that happen. (Cohen Interview)

While Cohen argues for production (not necessarily a shift in the American drama aesthetic), Julie Dubiner, on the other hand, believes developmental hell to be “a myth” propagated by playwrights. Dubiner believes that the current malaise in the American theatre is due to the twenty-first-century playwrights’ inability to write “producible plays” (Dubiner). In a seminar at Louisiana State University, Dubiner, who was at the time a literary manager and resident dramaturge at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, went on to say that most playwrights are wasting

her “precious hour” (the length of time it takes Dubiner to read a full-length play) by submitting works that could not possibly be produced. Though she holds that fellow dramaturges at ATL do not see eye-to-eye with her on this, she argues that plays should be solicited by resident dramaturges for production as a means of cutting time and expense: “I know plenty of playwrights. Most dramaturges know playwrights. Why not just ask them for scripts?” (Dubiner, Seminar). The idea that developmental hell does not exist is a tough nut for the playwright to swallow; furthermore, the elimination of an open submission (or at least, inquiry) process would eliminate access to many writers who are not already visible by having the right credentials (i.e., an Ivy-League degree, residency at New Dramatists or The O’Neill Playwrights Conference, etc.). As mentioned earlier, The O’Neill Center no longer has a “democratic” process in place for selection (though that process is already limited by the aesthetic preference for dialogue-driven American realism, i.e., “good drama”). As regional theatres follow suit, playwrights not in the financial position for the Ivy League are more-or-less barred from the professional theatre (regional, LORT, Off-Broadway, Small Performance Contract, etc.). There are some organizations which intend to help plays reach maximum audiences, however, their working methods are problematic. One such example is the National New Play Network.

The National New Play Network is, according to *Stage Directions* online, “the country’s alliance of non-profit theatres that champions the development, production, and continued life of new plays” (Vicki). The NNPN consists of twenty-six not-for-profit theatres which have a development and production apparatus, three of which are regional theatres. In short, the NNPN works as a kind of lottery: a number of plays are submitted, a selection of them are read, and if three or more theatres commit to producing the work, the play may have a “‘rolling world premiere’ through which the playwright develops a new work with at least three different



creative teams, for three different communities of patrons, ensuring the resulting play is of the highest possible quality” (Vicki). The NNPN exists as a means of moving away from “world premiereitis” which is, according to Elizabeth Bent of *American Theatre*, when “the play and its author do not see the light of future productions” (Bent “Long Live and Prosper”). On the one hand, the NNPN and its “Continued Life of New Plays Fund” suggests a healthy alternative for finding second and third productions of new plays. On the other hand, the issue with the rolling world premiere is that one playwright is championed at several theatres, which limits access to community and non-visible playwrights. Playwrights who have had rolling world premiere productions include John Biguenet and Steven Dietz, both of whom are already visible in American drama. If non-visible (invisible?) playwrights are losing access to theatres via programs which are said to promote the life of new works, then what are the alternatives? How can a playwright who wishes to gain visibility function in a system that lacks democratic standards of submission/acceptance? In a way, this has also helped move unknown playwrights toward readings, rather than production. The National New Playwright Network, by joining twenty-six theatres together, focuses on the few, the visible; playwrights who are not visible have no alternative but to seek out readings *as* surrogate productions.

In a 2010 blog for the New York Innovative Theatre (*Full of IT*), I offered similar concerns about the National New Play Network. I was surprised to find that Jason Loewith, the Executive Director of the NNPN had commented on the blog. Loewith offered the following:

The Continued Life of New Plays Fund, which I think you may misunderstand, incentivizes theaters in our membership and outside of it to take risks with new plays that don't yet have any pedigree. When three theaters (two of which must be members) agree to produce the same new play before any rehearsals have taken place, those theaters are given a grant to enhance collaboration amongst them for the good of the playwright and the productions. The result has been, since 2004, nearly 100 productions of 25 new plays, many of which have been by writers

without major New York pedigrees. Some of those plays and playwrights come directly from the communities in which our member theaters are located; as an example, Tom Gibbons - who lives in Philadelphia - wrote a play called PERMANENT COLLECTION. The play went through the Continued Life of New Plays Fund because InterAct in Philadelphia introduced it to other Network members. Tom's play has now been seen in more than 20 productions across the country, earning him some money as is deserved, and introducing various communities to the work of a writer who they would not otherwise know. And I believe I'm right in saying that the show has never been produced in New York. (Loewith qtd. in "What Can We Learn in Regional Theatre?")

There are several points in his response I feel that are worth investigating. What does it mean for a play to have a pedigree? Does this mean a play has already been produced once (as suggested with the name "Continued Life of New Plays")? And if so, when is a play no longer considered "new," especially in consideration of the "rolling world premiere?" Furthermore, which is a better case scenario: 100 productions of 100 new plays, or 100 productions of 25 plays? In terms of aesthetics, which "types" of plays are chosen? Next, there is the idea of the "New York Pedigree." Does the regional theatre community (and it is a single, insular community) still believe Broadway is the goal which a play needs to achieve in order to have a sense of value? If that is the case, then has the entire definition of a regional, decentralized theatre *failed*?

In the end, my questions (which I also asked of Loewith in the same blog) went unanswered. However, by highlighting his response to the blog, I believe that answers are all embedded within: for the regional theatre, Broadway is the goal; and because Broadway is the goal, visible playwrights will "continue" the life of their visible plays as a means of trying to attract Broadway attention. While I do not want to question a personal sense of success for a playwright who believes that success can only be measured by a Broadway production, I do question the ways in which the NNPN, which situates Broadway as *the* American dramatist's success, serve the needs of playwrights who have achieved visibility, limiting opportunity for "invisible" playwrights who may be a product of the very community where the regional theatre

is situated. Furthermore, I argue, this will lead to even more plays being moved to readings, rather than production, as both access and opportunities have been limited.

Outside of the limitations of access for more playwrights is the idea that one play can serve the needs of many theatres. As Julia Jarcho has suggested:

I also think it has to do with the kind of institutional model that's behind [developmental programs at regional theatres], which is the ambition to create a script that could operate as a finality, and travel from theatre to theatre. And that's how a lot of American theatre does work. The role of the playwright [in most not-for-profit theatre] is really separate from the rest of the production roles, and I definitely contrast it with Downtown New York. [The reduction of the playwright's role] which makes it make less sense, because most of us are in the room when rehearsals are happening. (Jarcho Interview)

Jarcho is echoing two concerns: one, a play can be shaped to meet national needs, which has to do with broad aesthetic judgments. Second, the role of the playwright is reduced in processes such as the National New Play Networks' programs, because the rest of the production mechanism takes precedence in order to justify any endowment from the NNPN. With these limitations in mind, it becomes apparent that the unknown/invisible playwright might *have* to settle for a developmental reading, sans-production, and sans-involvement in the process. What can a playwright do if his or her *only* option is a developmental reading? Janet Neipris, the Head of Graduate Development and Professor of Playwriting at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, offered the following thoughts regarding notions of access and developmental hell, as well as the positives to (visible) staged-readings on Theatreface.com:

IN terms of developmental hell, this all happened because of the economy. Nowadays a reading can be tantamount to what Off-Broadway used to be. It is prestigious, it does bring people out, it does get you together with a director and actors you may continue [to work] with [...] And you do learn something about your play--always, in order to go onto the next rewrite. And many theatres do use the reading in order to determine whether to produce the play. Manhattan Theatre Club in NYC certainly does. [sic.] (Theatreface.com)

Neipris finished with the encouraging words of advice: “[playwrights] all want the same thing –a production – but it is a PROCESS – truly [...] and you have to be patient. Plays have a long life and you can not predict what will get you to the finish line except doing the best writing you can [sic.]” (Theatreface.com). While Neipris is encouraging, she recognizes that there are economic strains that contribute to the proliferation of readings rather than productions.

Others have suggested that the fear of developing a work “to death” has lead to another problem: producing works that are not ready. As Jim O’Quinn notes in his *American Theatre* article, “A Dream Team of Disciplines,” at a conference hosted by TCG in 2008:

Jenny Larson, interim artistic director of Austin’s Salvage Vanguard Theater, turned a cliché on its head when she noted that the overabundance of new plays on Austin stages meant writers there had “the reverse of the developed-to-death problem—new work goes up so fast that sometimes it’s not ready.” (O’Quinn)

This argument of “developed to death” v. “not ready” indicates a larger problem: the playwright function has been diminished to the point of desperation. What this means is that even if a play is produced, it is probably part of the “overabundance” problem, indicating that the work is not ready. If the work is not produced, it indicates it needs more work. Either way, the play is not ready. It highlights a lose/lose scenario for writers in the regional theatre system.

The loss of access to the theatre, the loss of a “unique” voice that is not grounded in dialogue-driven, sanitized realism suggests that the playwright function is no longer of value. The playwright is indeed a relic, a product of “old culture.” As Michael Bigelow Dixon suggests, the playwright is at a disadvantage from the beginning (whether in an academic program or developmental workshop) because of the focus on aesthetic realism:

Generally my disposition is that the playwrights hope that the content they focus on will suggest a form for conveying it dramatically, but I think [the American aesthetic] is so rooted in realism at the starting point, that the theatre is missing a lot of theatrical possibilities. And I don’t think realism is necessarily the best form to convey the reality of young people working in theatre today. (Dixon Interview)

While Dixon does not suggest a complete disassociation with realism, his point is valid: a number of writers incorporate song, dance, dramatic media (a program developed at the University of Georgia at Athens), and puppetry into their work: why are these forms not valid? Why is the content of a play only expressed in one singular (and often, limiting) form which was developed over one hundred years ago? In short, realism, though one way of creating a work, is more or less dated, and as playwrights are pushed toward a dated aesthetic, they are themselves becoming a product of old culture. In short, developmental hell pushes writers to create works of American realism, moving writers away from theatricality and creative exploration.

While there are some positive experiences with workshops (Michael Wright offers several in his book *Playwriting: At Work and At Play*), the larger issues surrounding the dominance of the workshop and developmental programs need to be taken into consideration when asking the question “are playwrights necessary to the theatre?” If they are, then what should the playwright function be? How can the playwright carve out a unique vision when a playwright function has been structured that cannot consider subversive writing, nor playwrights who have not already achieved visibility?

### The Role of the Audience

One of the key concepts with developmental workshops is that the audience has a voice in the creation of a play. While those at the O’Neill are somehow involved in the practice of theatre, the talk-back session at most regional and other not-for-profit theatres is conducted with the subscriber base. What I wish to highlight in this section are the conditions for reception at the staged-readings and workshop productions, and how these conditions impact the audience’s horizons of expectations.

I will consider the role of the audience, not necessarily as *spectator* but as a *subscriber base* in the practice of not-for-profit theatre. This latter point is directly tied to the economics of maintaining a grant-friendly status (individual donors, national endowments, corporate grants, etc.) for many theatres in the United States. When an audience attends a staged-reading, it is not necessarily in a theatre. There is rarely “front of house” activity (house manager, ushers, concessions, etc.) This non-theatrical space exerts itself on an audience, and either gels with (or operates against) an audience’s horizons of expectations. As Ric Knowles suggests, “space itself exerts its influence, silently inscribing or disrupting specific (and ideologically coded) ways of working, for practitioners, and of seeing and understanding, for audiences,” and furthermore, “The geography of performance is both produced by and produces the cultural landscape and the social organization of the space in which it ‘takes place,’ and to shift physical and/or social space is to shift meaning” (62-63). In other words, if an audience expects to see theatre, and therefore the physical space of a theatre, to then venture into a rehearsal room or other found space for a reading already works against a horizon of expectations. Space operates as a context for the reading or performance; the context is an ideological construction that guides the decoding process of an audience.

The issue with a reading in a space (not necessarily a dark theatre) is the arrangement of actors, and the structural divide between actors and spectator either due to a long table, or a series of music stands. Here is where theatricality is lost completely. Indeed, a table may create a complicated power dynamic between the audience and actor/reader.

When considering the use of a table, Ric Knowles has highlighted the ways in which a table may completely alter a creative working model during rehearsal. Judith Thompson’s *Sled* had been “an exploratory workshop involving a designer, actors,” and “script assistants” who

were “all working with the playwright-as-director in the exploration and evolution of an experimental, expressionist script, growing and spreading throughout the undifferentiated rehearsal space,” which was radically altered when the stage-manager “set up the room with a long table at one end, behind which she, Judith [Thompson, as director and playwright] and the other actors sat while rehearsals were in progress” (61-62). The result was the creation of “a proscenium-like performance space with a defined separation between the actors and the audience” (61-62).

The above example highlights how the normative practice of setting up a table, a *divide*, informs working practices in rehearsals and readings. Knowles moves on to suggest that as a result, the script “evolved in increasingly naturalistic ways,” while “actors came increasingly to be constructed as the to-be-looked-at-objects of a consumerist gaze” (62). With a staged-reading, behind music stands, behind a table, the actors are looked at in seated positions, partially hidden, eyes cast down to the script, where connections between character/actor can never be fully realized (nor fully coded through bodily connections, movements, stillness, etc.), and spectators are asked to sit on the “other side,” representing both the consumerist gaze, and the diagnostician. After all, if there were nothing wrong with the play, it would be produced. Put another way, with the workshop model and the ensuing public reading, the audience becomes not only a consumerist, but a *potential* consumerist; a problem-solver there to iron out the quirks prior to deciding whether or not to spend any more time (or any money) in this piece of theatre industry.

Another point, however, is that the bodies are not truly “looked at.” That is to say, live performance presents codified bodies moving in space, while the reading usually has the actors looking down toward a script (occasionally, at one another, but certainly with limited

“connectedness”), while sitting and turning pages. It becomes a radio theatre, as the spectator has very little to *look at* vis-à-vis the visual, dramatic action. If an audience member were to suggest that “something is missing” in the work they’ve just heard, it would be the additional elements that make it a fully realized production. However, the music stands as sites of performance may confuse the spectator, as it represents “performance” while holding back the performer.

With the not-for-profit theatre, the audience at a staged-reading is taken into consideration, as suggested, only insofar as they represent a subscriber base. Part of the function of the audience is to give input to the playwright, to “help” find and solve any problems that the script presents. The theatre will often tell the audience that this is to ensure a tried-and-true method to eliminate the element of risk prior to production. A January, 2011 *New York Times* article, preciously titled “Hey, Kids, Let’s Put On a Reading!”, argues rather unconvincingly that readings offer cultural capital as audiences can claim they have heard the work prior to production:

New Yorkers love nothing more than to boast, “I was there first,” whether it’s getting a reservation at a buzzworthy restaurant, snatching up the latest handbag or seeing a new film before the rest of the country. (Piepenburg)

Journalist Erik Piepenburg (and through him, *The New York Times* itself) is *selling* the idea of a play-reading as cultural capital, just as exciting (if not more) than a realized production.

Piepenburg continues, “Before a show gets a full-fledged production, it has to start somewhere; a reading is a work in progress needing feedback” (Piepenburg). Here, we see the staged-reading has been coded as a completely necessary step. The suggestion is that any show needs to be read, before a scrutinizing audience, in order to move toward a full production. The idea that a play needs a to go through developmental workshops ignores the fact that a number of works that



have been “commercial successes” have not necessarily been through the workshop process (Conor Macpherson’s Broadway hit *The Sea Farer* is an example; granted, Macpherson is an Irish playwright, and not subject to the same scrutiny). However, readings have become such a part of the theatre mechanism that they are now being offered as not only an aspect of development, but *as* American theatre. In other words, the process is the product, and the audience role is not just consumer, but problem-solver.

Jeffrey Sweet has discussed the problems with audience talk-backs at length in both *The Dramatist* and *Solving Your Script* as well as articles found in *The Dramatist*:

Improperly run talk-backs are often either worthless or destructive. If you have to agree to the talk-back to get the reading, grit your teeth and do so, but prepare yourself for the likelihood that you'll have to sit through a lot of advice, mostly well-intended but also often aggravating (Sweet “Feedback”)

Sweet reminds the writer that talkbacks are “required by the grant that is subsidizing the series, or they are a part of a theater’s desire to increase the audience’s emotional investment in the company” (“Feedback”). In short, “talk-backs are for the audience,” as “the opportunity to instruct and enlighten artists can be very satisfying” (“Feedback”). Most importantly, Sweet offers the suggestion that writers strategize the talk-back with the literary manager prior to the reading:

If you can, for God's sake, keep her from opening the session by asking the audience "What do you think?" That's an invitation to the kind of stuff I quoted above. Instead, formulate some questions to ask the audience, specific questions like "Who do you think the central character of the play is?" "What do you think she wants?" "At what point did you realize the nature of the relationship between Morris and Beverly?" "If you had to summarize the theme of the play in a sentence, what would it be?" Notice that none of these questions is intended to elicit a response about the quality of the work but rather about what the audience thinks it understands of the information you've placed on the stage. (“Feedback”)

Finally, Sweet offers this valuable piece of advice: “Resist the impulse to answer back to someone who bruises your feelings or insults your baby” as that person “could be the artistic

director's boyfriend" or "a member of the board and might have something to say about the budget for the next season" ("Feedback").

As suggested throughout the first two chapters, there is a small network of visible people in the theatre, and learning to negotiate a talkback is, on one hand, a crucial skill to learn in order to survive the regional theatre circuit. On the other hand, navigating through the endless cycle of readings and talk-backs at any level guarantees neither visibility, nor production. The reason given for reading after reading may be to ready a work for production; however, readings are meant to satisfy grants and attract audiences. The play and the playwright are not the ones benefitting from this endless circuit.

### Conclusions on Developmental Hell

In the closing of the last section, I stated "the play and the playwright are not the ones benefitting from this endless circuit" of staged-readings. However, playwrights do not necessarily need to submit to developmental programs; or, put another way, if they do submit to developmental programs, they need to understand fully what the expectations are for the writer, the director, and the administration, and where the responsibility of the developmental program ends. As Michael Bigelow Dixon has suggested:

I think the reason that organizations participate in developmental processes for new plays vary tremendously. Artistic staff members at some theatres hope that developmental efforts will lead to production, at other theatres staff hope that their efforts will lead to a lengthy and mutually beneficial relationship with a writer, and at other theatres staff can hope that the process will lead to an improved script which, even if their theatre doesn't produce it, will find a production elsewhere. And it probably goes without saying that the vast majority of playwrights collaborating with a theatre on the development of a play hope their work will lead to a production at that theatre. Actually, I think everyone involved on both sides of the relationship is basically sincere in their intentions, but I don't think everyone always articulates their expectations clearly or fully.

Also I don't know to what extent playwrights feel they have to participate. I suspect there are often pressures and implications. And I guess that participating in a developmental process *when one doesn't want to would lead to feeling you're in developmental hell, but ultimately, playwrights choose to participate*. They have things to gain from the investment of time and resources, from an insightful dramaturgical dialogue, and from a chance to explore possibilities with other talented and supportive theatre artists [emphasis added]. (Dixon Interview)

What Dixon implies is that there are two sides of the coin regarding “developmental hell.”

Institutions may want to develop relationships with playwrights, but cannot guarantee production. On the other hand, if a playwright *chooses* to submit to developmental programs, the playwright is making the choice to conform to the expectations of the larger American theatre machinery. However, Dixon's idea that playwrights *choose* points to the kind of agency that has been lacking in the rhetoric of developmental institutions. Taken to an extreme, it can be argued that the reason why the developmental programs have proliferated is because the playwrights have submitted themselves to the process, rather than avoid it all together. That is, if a playwright chooses to be involved, to what extent can the playwright rally against the developmental program? What are the expectations? And, most important, what are the alternatives? I will seek to address these questions in chapters four, five, and six.

In the last two sections, I have suggested that the spaces for readings and workshops are, like all spaces, ideologically loaded, especially those that intentionally try to evoke figures of the past. As suggested, the O'Neill Conference just in name alone evokes the ghost of Eugene O'Neill. The name suggests to those playwrights selected that their work featured at the Conference is part of the O'Neill playwriting legacy, and therefore, are on the same hierarchal level with (the constructed figure of) O'Neill. The location, the setting for *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *Ah, Wilderness!*, along with its proximity to Yale, evokes O'Neill further by

suggesting ties with the Yale School of Drama, spearheaded by George Pierce Baker by invitation in 1925, which in turn evokes the 47 Workshop at Harvard.

In short, by being “at” the O’Neill Conference, the playwright is suddenly part of an elite class: the Harvard- and Yale-educated, under the watchful eye of a sanctified O’Neill. However, as suggested in this section, ideology often masks itself. A room is never just a room: it is a location for an event. If an audience brings a horizon of expectations which include a fully-realized production and they see a script-in-hand stumble-through, there is an automatic disappointment. Something is wrong with what they have seen, and the problem must be the play itself; the playwright is therefore to blame for writing a work that is missing a key component, and the play continues through a network of developmental hell, and the playwright function operates as a kind of hamster in a wheel, running through developmental programs, with the off-chance of landing a production for a work that is, in actuality, better suited for a reading.

In the next section, I am going to offer a brief case study, Dan O’Brien’s *The Cherry Sisters Revisited*. I want to highlight the ways in which it was developed, given a workshop production, and produced as part of the Humana Festival in 2010. My suggestion with the case study is that, given the resulting criticism of the work, the development process, which is supposed to eliminate risk, does not result in a work that audiences and critics enjoy: rather, the process-as-product, despite its resilience as an operating model in the theatre, has failed.

## THE CHERRY SISTERS REVISITED

In the spring of 2010, Dan O’Brien’s *The Cherry Sisters Revisited* was given a workshop, with an open-to-the-public concert-reading (at music stands). The play had been rehearsed for the reading, presenting the play as if the reading were ipso facto a final production. In *The*

*Cherry Sisters Revisited*, playwright Dan O'Brien seeks to call forward the ghosts of one of an oft-mocked turn-of-the-century vaudeville act, which features five sisters. With this production, the sisters step out of time (that is, they are ghosts), presenting an otherwise linear story regarding their rise to infamy on the American stage. In discussing the play, O'Brien said that vegetables and fruit were actually sold in the theatre so audiences could pelt them.

The workshop, which functioned as a rehearsal, was in preparation for production at the 2010 Humana Festival at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. The play had been solicited by dramaturge and literary manager Julie Dubiner (though this was during a period when they were accepting unsolicited scripts). According to O'Brien, it had been rejected two years earlier:

Yes, Julie did request the script. We hadn't sent it to her because normally Humana doesn't do plays with music, or at least historically they haven't. But Julie & co. had read other plays of mine before, and I'd had a short piece in the Humana anthology project in 2002, so we knew and like each other. (O'Brien)

Although a production with the Humana is certainly a success for O'Brien, the solicitation of the script points to the Humana Festival's lack of access and democracy, and the further elitism of the current regional play development world (i.e., the current practices at the O'Neill). The justification is that the literary manager and the playwright knew one another, and that in the very least should reduce the risk of producing a play that was either not ready, or just "bad" (by whomever makes the aesthetic judgments at the Actors' Theatre of Louisville). The point that the play was one "with music," a style of theatre not accepted by The Humana in previous years, was dismissed, because Dubiner and O'Brien know and like each other.

Though *The Cherry Sisters Revisited* was moving toward production, the director, actors, playwright, and dramaturge made more of a commotion over the staged-reading before the LSU Theatre students (such as what stage directions to read, which moments required actors to stand, which moments required actors to face one-another, etc.), than locating some of the key issues

and challenges with the script. The issues I'm referring to include how to keep the script theatrical, instead of reliant on stage directions which will not be heard by an audience, and how to answer some of the technical demands (such as blink-of-an-eye-costume changes before an audience, a moment that in this version of the script, seems to serve no purpose). In short, the workshop reading fell into the category, as suggested by Steven Dietz, of works meant for readings rather than productions.

As the dramaturge and moderator for the public discussion after the work, Dubiner never explained why Humana was giving a workshop reading at Louisiana State University. At an educational institution with a theatre studies curriculum (where undergraduates are asked to perform the role of the dramaturge for main-stage productions), clarifying the intent would be useful, and unmask some of the hidden agenda behind the reading (including its inclusion via solicitation, a reading *as* production at LSU, etc.). The reason for performing the script was to hear it with music, and locate any problems. After all, the Humana Festival makes it a point to never produce a musical or a play with music (another ideological mask). Rather, Dubiner simply asked the audience, "So, what did you love about it?" This type of question is one that Sweet would suggest moving away from. A clearer question could guide the playwright and dramaturge in decision making. As the production date was set, opening with a question about what the audience "loved" seemed to be a not-so-subtle lipservice to LSU, rather than an investigation and exploration of the mechanisms of the play, and the function of the workshop reading.

One student loved the play, and projected her idea of what the ending was supposed to mean, while asking, "That line was really funny in the stage directions, and it sets up the following line of dialogue; so, how are you going to do that in production?" The answer: "I

wrote that in for the reading. I'm having fun with stage directions." The following question should be, "Without reading the stage direction out loud, how will the next line be funny? Is there grounding for this joke, for this moment?" In the end, the staged reading acted as a surrogate for a production, thereby continuing the *process as product* in the American theatre.

The Humana Festival itself is starting to creak. Eliza Bent visited the festival in March, 2010, and reviewed the plays and the over-all event for *American Theatre Magazine*. When talking about the festival, she notes:

Like an octogenarian who pairs a cruddy sweater with surprisingly chic reading glasses, this Humana's lineup was an interesting mashup of ensemble-driven adventurousness and bordering-on-conservative conventionality. (48)

The "conservative conventionality" she refers to happens to be the dramatic works, which were generally unimpressive for Bent. Most unimpressive, by far, was *The Cherry Sisters Revisited*. She begins the review, "Have you ever seen something so bad it's...bad?" (49). Noting that the "sisters' performances in their vaudeville shows are barely distinguishable from their portrayals of their backstage selves," Bent goes on to say, "by the last act, when rotten fruits and vegetables (and an anachronistic condom) are thrown at the sisters, I'll admit I wanted to join in" (49). In short, the process-as-product system, the moving of *The Cherry Sisters* through five workshops and a workshop reading, in order to guarantee that it was a "good drama" before moving into a fully mounted production, had failed.

In the same article, artistic director Marc Masterson suggests "The hallmark of Humana...is that we develop plays by producing them" (49). This quote is problematic for several reasons: the first being the series of workshops that *The Cherry Sisters Revisited* had been developed with, including the workshop at Louisiana State University. Is this a normal part of the developmental process for Humana? If so, how does the staged-reading (with music) act as

a surrogate for a production? How does it figure as the “next step” toward production? Were there massive rewrites prior to the opening at the ATL? Furthermore, the phrase, “we develop plays by producing them,” is actually echoing a more recent theatre group’s mission statement: 13P’s “We don’t develop plays. We DO them” (13P). This move to assurance that production is the natural last step comes at a time when developmental programs are being re-evaluated, and yet, there is still artistic elitism found at the ATL and a number of other regional theatres across the country.

Bent notes that the Actors Theatre of Louisville is moving away from script-based works to devised/ensemble pieces. Indeed, one of the panels Bent attended was titled “From the Rehearsal Room to the World Tour: How ensemble theatre companies are shaping new play-development” (49). Along with the ill reception of the “dramatic” works, the inclusion of the ensemble theatre panel suggests that American development and production can survive without the playwright. Taken to an extreme, this indicates that the playwright has no function, and written, dramatic works have run their course. Bent concludes, “I imagine in future years there will be more than three-out-of-seven ensemble works [...] represented on Humana’s roster” (49).

To be clear, I am not suggesting that readings need to be entirely abolished. On the contrary, I believe there is an approach to writing that can be taught, and should be taught, so the author knows how to tell the story that he or she wants to tell. Or, as Connerton puts it, when discussing wardrobe that satirizes Macaroni:

To read or wear clothes is in a significant respect similar to reading or composing a literary text. To read or compose a text as literature, and as belonging to a particular genre of literature, is not to approach it without preconception; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for or how to set about composing. (11)



Readings are a natural part of that process, and I am not suggesting that they should be eliminated. That would be a step backward in the process. What I am arguing, however, is that readings and workshops are loaded with hidden ideology that shape the reception of the plays being read, especially as the readings are performed as a kind of production. The horizon of expectations an audience has when it encounters a work are generally lowered when the work is offered as a workshop or staged-reading.

### Re-Thinking the American Canon

The production and reception of *The Cherry Sisters* provides a number of insights into the working mechanisms of the regional theatre (questions of access, as well as the notion that a play needs to be developed until it is deemed ready for production). Indeed, looking at *The Cherry Sisters Revisited* suggests that the movement of a work through various developmental programs only leaves the playwright-written work watered down and un-engaging, while devised forms are filling a void left by an antiquated playwright function. However, developmental hell is not the only issue with the regional theatre: it is still self-consciously lurking in the shadow of Broadway.

Taking Loewith's comments vis-à-vis the National New Play Network into account (in particular, the NNPN's hope to attract Broadway attention), it becomes more clear why developmental hell has become calcified: there is a misguided notion that plays need to be pushed through the developmental circuit in order to become commercially viable. Perhaps, a great production at a regional theatre can lead to a Broadway production. This certainly has happened in the past, but why should Broadway be the only mark of a play's success? Wasn't the regional theatre formed in order to move away from Broadway as the definition of success in the

American theatre? What about all of the plays that do not earn a Broadway production? Have those plays failed? Because I believe that success does not have to be defined by a Broadway or LORT production, I would argue, once and for all, that Broadway should be removed from the regional conversation.

If Broadway is truly no longer the zenith of success, and if the regional theatre fails to recognize this, then how can the American theatre work to value the “amateur” (i.e., non-Broadway, non-LORT)? How can a redefining of the canon (including the ways in which theatre is taught) move the American drama towards a number of aesthetics (not just realism), and encourage playwrights to resist developmental programs which devalue their role in the creation of theatre? Finally, how can we in the academy train students to move away from the idea that Broadway *is* the standard for success vis-à-vis the championing of amateur models?

### The American Playwright

On Monday, October 18, 2010, I attended Playwrights Week at the Lark Development Center in New York City. John Larson, Artistic Director and Founder of The Lark, opened the evening. He explained that The Lark should be viewed as “a rehearsal company. We create a platform for writers to explore, in particular, commercial ideas of what a play should be” (Larson). The word “commercial” automatically suggests the kind of “American realism” (at the very least, a known dramatic structure) that audiences have been encountering since the days of David Belasco and Eugene O’Neill. The creation of the play is “very parliamentary,” in terms of what “strikes” the team (writer, director, actors) as “relevant or important?” Because of the commercial, streamlined aesthetic, automatically the work that is important is the work that is the “American experience.” Even if the play is not necessarily grounded in realism (such as the

comedy *Spacebar: A Broadway Play by Kyle Sugarman* by Michael Mitnick), it is nevertheless presented in a comprehensible arrangement of events and images.

Morgan Jennes, the resident dramaturge for The Lark, suggests “The plays [featured during *Playwrights’ Week*] deal with themes of loss, themes that deal with what is valuable. These themes are quintessentially American” (Jennes). For Jennes, these quintessential themes found in the plays include “what it means to have a house, what it means to have a family, what it means to lose a family, what it means to have a mother and father” (Jennes). While a Marxist might suggest, “what it means to eat,” should be listed alongside these universal themes, Krasner’s suggestion that the canon contain dramas with “conceptual coherence” vis-à-vis a socio-historical moment, as well an acceptance of a horizon of expectations created by/with the audience, is fully realized in Playwrights’ Week, which follows the patterns of yesteryear, presenting scripts that do not challenge ideology, but rather exist as products of a given time. This is not to incriminate or challenge the works that were read, but rather to suggest further that the American drama is geared toward a single aesthetic, one in which social realism is championed, and moments of potential (socially subversive) avant-gardism are swallowed by camp. In short, the LARK contributes directly to developmental hell.

As this fascination with “quintessentially American” themes suggests, the problem with The LARK is similar to the problems with a number of other developmental programs: as a single aesthetic becomes championed, the ability for the playwright to function is diminished; in other words, playwrights *have* to write a certain way (realism), and their work *has* to meet the criterion that it does not directly challenge a status-quo. Because this way of writing is akin to

the coded “good drama” throughout the twentieth century, the American canon of drama features works that bear remarkable similarity: the work is dialogue-driven and gendered male.<sup>2</sup>

When considering the canon of American drama, I would argue that it is the role of the academy to change our notions of canonization. After all, most theatre students are introduced to works in anthologies in courses such as “Western Drama,” “American Drama,” etc. Scholar Marc Robinson has attempted to answer the problem of canonization by asking American theatre educators and practitioners to consider a new starting point for the canon: that is, rather than using only Eugene O’Neill as starting point for American dramatic literature (as suggested in chapter two, he is the first “canonized” American dramatist), scholars and teachers need to include Gertrude Stein as one of the dual starting points. As Robinson suggests, taken as a whole the “O’Neill-Arthur Miller-August Wilson line of development,” as “the making of American drama, as it was told, had an overwhelming predictability to it” (1). By introducing Gertrude Stein, the American drama would not be focused solely on a dramatic structure of cause-and-effect (i.e., good drama), as Stein “preferred instead to build a play using other elements, all the things that often fell away when a narrative whisked readers from station to station” (2).

Robinson continues:

Stein was the first American dramatist to infuse the basic materials of dramatic art with independent life, making them noteworthy in themselves. She reanimated language, letting it be heard for its own sensual qualities, no longer just serving stories but now aspiring to the same radiance as, say, a wash of paint on an abstract-expressionist canvas. She rethought the use of gesture in the theater,

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<sup>2</sup> In recent years, several theatre companies have emerged which look to produce plays that are not realistic. The *Dramatists Guild Resource Directory 2009* lists sixty-seven pages of theatres that accept queries or unsolicited submissions, indicating each company’s style preference (89-156). While many of these companies request traditional/commercial fare, some companies request non-realistic works; for example, Theatre of Yugen seeks “experimental, movement based” plays: “traditional and new works of East-West fusion primarily based on Noh forms” (149). Furthermore, there are companies such as Studio 42, an Off-Off Broadway troupe, which has a mission to produce the “unproducible,” meaning “plays with scale, complexity, cast size, subject matter or potential depravity that takes them out of consideration for most other companies” (*Studio 42*) which actively seek theatrical, non-realistic works.

devising a poetics of movement, wherein simple actions have a beauty and significance apart from their functions. (2)

This embrace of wordplay that moves away from a strict adherence to linear narrative suggests a widening of the canon, which could include Sam Shepard, Maria Irene Fornes, Adrienne Kennedy, and Richard Foreman. What Robinson is suggesting is not a complete break with the present construction of the canon, but to rethink how the canon may be larger, and more authors who do not adhere to strict realism (in the dialogue) may be embraced by the larger theatre-going public (which includes scholars, students of theatre, critics, etc.).

If there is a problem with this approach, however, it is the suggestion that American drama still *needs* an American canon. After all, as Jill Dolan suggests, women playwrights such as Theresa Rebeck and Marsha Norman are still yielding production control to an apparatus that is male-dominated (“Making a Spectacle” 562-563). Furthermore, acceptance into the canon suggests that somehow the work is still gendered male (Dolan has argued eloquently that Marsha Norman’s *‘night, Mother* earned critical praise and acceptance in the canon because it “closely” resembled “typical canonical dramaturgy with all its gendered implication” in her article “Bending Gender to Fit the Canon: The Politics of Production,” which became her second chapter in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*).

When looking at the reception of Pulitzer-Award-Winning Playwright Paula Vogel’s work as good American drama, David Savran suggests that she, as a playwright, is performing “in drag.” In analyzing the critical and popular success of *How I Learned to Drive*, a play which makes a child molester sympathetic, and which does not present the story in a linear way, Savran writes:

Paula’s dramaturgical method may be deconstructionist, but it relies heavily on empathy, meticulously deliberate plotting, a teleological structure, careful attention to the stuff of history, and a somewhat more literary style than the work

of many of her contemporaries. It represents, in short, Paula's successful assimilation – and critique – of a style of playwriting that has historically been coded as masculine. If nothing else, there is a sense of assurance in the way in which the play addresses its audience that is more reminiscent of *Glengarry Glen Ross* than *The Heidi Chronicles*. (203)

Savran concludes, "Yet Paula's theatrical cross-dressing [...] endeavors neither to lull her audience into complacency nor to 'conceal or disavow what a dangerous act drag can be, onstage and off.' [...] Paula represents a way of defiantly taking the stage." (203) For Savran, Vogel's success is located in her ability to "assimilate" the constructed "good drama" (i.e., coded male), in order to create a (self-aware) critique of male-structured playwriting. To some extent, I believe Savran (who is very close with Vogel, hence his use of her first name) is reading too far into Vogel's work, as if there is a hidden agenda. Rather, I would argue that Vogel is telling a story which echoes the historic avant-garde (deconstructionist/non-linear plot), the classics (the use of the Greek chorus), and the rag-tag circumstances of *personal* American history (being molested by a family member, posing for pictures which may be sold to Playboy, learning how to be an aggressive driver, etc.).

The issue with Savran's account is that he is trying to justify Vogel's inclusion in the American canon (suggesting a personal preference for Vogel's work over other canonized authors). However, at the core of Savran's argument, there is a lurking sense that acceptance into the canon may not be such a bad thing after all. The underlying problem is that the canon is still coded-male and geared toward "good drama," whether the work of Vogel is accepted into it or not. If the core issue with the construction of the canon of American drama is that it creates rigid, coded-male guidelines which push theatre into the realm of "old culture," while assimilating success stories of those who do not identify as gender-male, then how can we create a study of theatre that does not rely on the American canon? How can we move away from the

idea that a playwright function is one that serves actors, directors, and administrators who facilitate staged-readings?

I argue again that it has to begin with the academy. Richard Schechner has offered some key advice in regard to how theatre can be taught. I want to take a moment to look at some of his thoughts, and see how they can operate against notions of canonization, as well as open up the conversation of the American theatre as a small, local phenomenon.

In 1994, Richard Schechner argued for an overhaul of the ways in which theatre had been taught in the United States. Because theatre arts training did not necessitate a (profitable) career, he believed the academy was doing a disservice to students who entered the academy believing they would receive “professional” or “preprofessional training” (7-8). Schechner argues that theatre programs should have three components: the first would train students in “performance studies,” as performance offers a lens with which to view/understand the world (8). The second component would be a “theatre arts” concentration, which would offer students the ability to create theatre while recognizing their employment would not necessarily be within the professional theatre (i.e., Broadway, or for that matter, television, or film). The third component would be up to professors: identify and forward those students who were extraordinary; these would be the students who moved onto graduate school and conservatories, and who should gain employment (9). While I don’t agree with the role of education as facilitating monetary gain (that is, a lucrative career should not be the end of education), I think there is value to the suggestion of training students to be “amateur” (in the “lover of” sense of the word) theatre artists, who can add to “the history of theatre” while earning their income elsewhere (9). I would argue that most of New York Independent Theatre operates in this way, as most NYC, non-Broadway practitioners operate this way. Therefore, I feel that the model for theatre, the “amateur” model

with playwright-as-producer is, without question, the best way to keep American theatre vital, plural, and in short, alive. This echoes the sort of “amateur” celebration of the early regional theatre, which ties together members of the community to create works *for* the community. This would also create not just a “canon” but “canons” of American drama, as various regions could call upon their own distinctive theatrical past in order to train generations of theatre lovers and local practitioners. As for the role of academic professors identifying theatre artists who have the talent to move forward into the professional/regional theatre: I cannot speak to that completely. On one hand, it is sound advice. On the other, I have to wonder if this will continue to keep the professional theatre insular. Is there no way to erase the boundary between “amateur” and “professional?” Should it be erased?

In short, the American canon, regardless of biological sex, still engenders the playwright male, which I argue, is the result of attempting to fit theatre in the national conversation. By moving theatre into a more local conversation, students of theatre will have access to direct examples which occur at local colleges, high schools, and community theatres, and of course, learn their discipline by building their own theatre companies. Perhaps the National Theatre of the United States would not look at one playwright, one community, or one street (Broadway). Rather, it would exist in various theatres, various communities, and with various artists working within the framework of various aesthetics (tried-and-true, or otherwise), which would suggest that theatre *is* a national art by operating via many, local practices.

To summarize this section, and take Jill Dolan’s thoughts into account vis-à-vis smaller theatre companies (highlighted in chapter one), along with Schechner’s suggestion that most post-college practitioners do not immediately work on the “tried-and-true,” I believe this will further the notion that a canon is not necessarily a fixed, national phenomenon. Rather, the



*canons* will consist of various local theatre events, all of which are worthy of study, giving students the idea that canonization is not something that marks success (and therefore, will guide students in recognizing the falsity in the belief that non-canonical works are “not successful”). Students will be asked to consider the love of theatre, the love of writing and producing the new and local play, which can truly give a sense that theatre is plural, diverse, and therefore, regardless of where it takes place in the country, American.

## EXPECTATIONS

In chapter two, I attempted to create a genealogy of new play development, with an eye toward the construction of the playwriting workshop. I highlighted how the playwright function has operated as a carpenter (“workshop”), a scientist (“laboratory”), a priest (“The Work”), and finally, with the never-ending-reading-circuits, as a relic. With this chapter, I have suggested that with the decentralization of theatre and the rise of developmental programs, workshop productions and public staged-readings have become surrogates for productions.

The staged-readings provide haunted texts (i.e., “good drama”) in coded (and often ideologically haunted) locations. The audience is then guided to diagnose and repair, as the readers are either seated behind a table, eyes downward (like doctors in an operating theatre), or as the readers sit at music stands, site of another kind of performance, with their (un)coded bodies being obstructed from view, giving the sense that something is missing. Because space “exerts its influence,” a number of ideological constraints are in place even before the play is read. Furthermore, the not-for-profit developmental reading, given by companies that sanitize the dramatic works in order to keep corporate sponsors happy (or at the very least, to not ideologically conflict with the consumer base), has failed entirely.

Finally, the canon of American drama (which consists mostly of Broadway and regional successes) cannot account for the plurality of American theatre artists and their communities. Having identified these various problems, there needs to be a solution to the ideological constraints found in the current development and/or production programs. Are there ways in which to make the development process more geared toward the playwright? What of the elusive fully-realized production? Over the course of my research, I have found there is a solution to many of these issues, and the answer lies with the playwrights: the playwrights have to create their own workshops, and their own productions; in the words of Terrence McNally, they have to “build their own fucking theatre.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE NEW YORK WRITERS' BLOC: CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

Rather than try to free ourselves from limitation, we should recognize it and work with it. The question should be “What do you want the show to accomplish, and how can that be facilitated by purposeful employment of limitation?”

–Nicholas J. Zaunbrecher, from “The Elements of Improvisation: Structural Tools for Spontaneous Theatre” (54)

While working on *Something Wonderful Right Away*, I thought I would better understand the work created by The Second City by attempting sketches myself.

– Jeffrey Sweet, from the Introduction to *The Value of Names and Other Plays*.

### AN INTRODUCTION TO THEATRE

On April 7, 2011, I attended an introduction to theatre class at SUNY New Paltz. The subject for the day was “the playwright.” I was asked, along with Lecturer Bob Miller from the Department of Communication and Media, to talk about the playwright, and how the playwright works with others in order to create a script. As I sat and listened to Miller’s overview, I had two thoughts: the first, “that sounds wonderful”; and the second, “that sounds incredibly dated.” Like many who teach intro to theatre, I have been asked to use textbooks that give a narrow vision of how the playwright operates: he or she sits alone in a space, has an idea, writes the play, sends it out into the world with an attached cover letter, a producer picks it up, a director is hired, a design team is brought on board, and if the playwright is lucky, the play looks something like what the writer had imagined. The step-by-step process to landing a production sounds nice, on one hand, because it suggests a full production. It sounds dated, on the other hand, because this is not how the twenty-first-century playwright functions in the United States (a point I will return to in chapter five).

Our reason for the visit was to promote the New Play Festival at SUNY New Paltz. We did indeed solicit scripts from local playwrights, students, and alumni, and the plays were presented as concert readings, rather than being given full productions. The pedagogical reasoning behind the festival is to give student directors and actors a chance to approach new material, and learn how working with new material contrasts with working with established texts. Unfortunately, because the plays were presented as concert readings, the New Play Festival created for students a false binary, that there are new works (works that are read) and established works (canonical works that should be fully produced). While I have argued that a playwright might find success with a workshop (as definitions of success can fluctuate), I can't shake the feeling that the SUNY New Paltz festival is part of the larger problem. One reason is that the scripts were "fixed" (that is, they could not be altered) after the first reading in January. As a result, actors and directors had a lengthy rehearsal period for plays (most of which run under a half hour) that were to be read, not fully produced. My second concern about the festival is that few area playwrights have participated in the rehearsal process, though the invitation was given with the hopes of incorporating the writers as much as possible as the plays moved to a stage (though, granted, a stage in the gray area between the concert-reading-style and workshop-production style).

The students attending the intro class were surprised when I mentioned my relationship with directors and actors, and how I have achieved productions through these relationships rather than the model suggested by Miller, where a playwright writes a script, sends it out into the world, and waits. Looking at role of the playwright in Robert Cohen's *Theatre*, an introduction textbook that many students use in classes across the country, including the one I visited, the playwright function is described as follows:

The playwright is central in the most obvious ways. She or he provides the point of origin for nearly every play production- the script, which is the rallying point around which the director or producer gathers the troops. Yet that point of origin is also a point of departure. The days when a Shakespeare or Molière would gather actors around, read his text to them, and then coach them in its proper execution are long gone. What we have today is a more specialized theatrical hierarchy in which the director is interposed as the playwright's representative to the theatrical team: the actors and designers. More and more, the playwright's function is to write the play and then disappear, for once the script has been printed, duplicated, and distributed, the playwright's physical participation is relegated mainly to serving as the director's sounding board and rewrite person. Indeed, the playwright's mere physical presence in the rehearsal hall can become an embarrassment, more tolerated than welcomed—and sometimes not even tolerated. (314)

According to Cohen, not only is the playwright relegated to script writing in isolation, but his or her mere *presence* is an embarrassment. Cohen himself is a director, so one can assume that he would champion the function of the director over other artists in the theatre – but the playwright as *embarrassment*?

Reading on, Cohen suggests there are playwrights who do more than write in isolation and cause embarrassment in the rehearsal hall just by being present: “Some playwrights work from actors’ improvisations, and others participate quite fully in rehearsals”; however, “the exceptions do not disprove the rule” (314). Cohen does move forward and explain that the playwright-as-isolated figure is something the playwright should want, as “*independence* of the playwright is generally her or his most important characteristic. Playwrights must seek from life, from their own lives—and not from theatrical establishments”(314). How does that defend his position? There are several points here I would like to highlight with these passages. The first is his tone: in an introduction textbook, I would assume that Cohen would be more descriptive, and less prescriptive, vis-à-vis the various ways a playwright can function (although, for Cohen, there is only one way). On top of that, Cohen gives a dictum of what playwrights should and should not write about. While plays about tortured writers/theatre artists are certainly not something I

would be interested in, on the other hand, Stephen King, as a novelist, has had an exciting career creating stories about novelists who are plunged into the deepest of horrors.

Most alarming is the idea that a playwright has to stay away from the rest of the theatre production apparatus, because distance from the theatre is what the writer *needs*. Somehow, being around directors and actors will corrupt the playwright's art. For Cohen, the playwright shouldn't be in the hallway, creating an uncomfortable work environment, but should be out *living* and therefore *experiencing* something to write about. While I am sporting with Cohen's not-so-subtle phrasing, which is essentially telling any playwright he ever works with to keep out of his rehearsal space, the idea that the playwright should not be involved with the rehearsal process, for Cohen, represents the best possible scenario for everyone involved in the practice of theatre. Can that honestly be the case for the American theatre? Do writers need less exposure to their work as rehearsed, as processed, as produced? Do writers need less time spent with actors, directors, and designers? Are writers really that much of an embarrassment?

Because these are passages found in an introduction textbook, they are difficult to argue against in a classroom full of students preparing to take a quiz. Announcing "your book is wrong," or insulting my colleagues by suggesting "writing a script and sending it out to the producer is one way," would further argue for the freedom of the playwright to simply *play with others*. I understand how callow that sounds; however, one of the reasons I became a playwright in the first place is because I have enjoyed the camaraderie and the community that I have created with my fellow practitioners. Is that enjoyment of community somehow wrong, or antithetical to the need of individual artists?

I believe the American theatre needs to rethink or re-imagine the role and the work of the playwright. I believe that a rethinking of the playwright function will invite new approaches to

production, and new workshop models. For the rest of this dissertation, I am going to highlight the practices of playwrights who have created “do-it-yourself” models, and how these models create artistic communities which have a dialogic relationship with the community-at-large.

In this chapter, I am going to look at the methodology of the New York Writers’ Bloc, a do-it-yourself playwriting workshop which incorporated improvisational performance into the craft of the playwright. This is a marked change with the status quo, as the playwright becomes actively engaged with the world of the actor. Furthermore, as I will suggest, improvisation is key to creating community.

I argue that the New York Writers’ Bloc (referred to as “the Bloc” by members) represents the best case scenario for a workshop that is geared toward the writer. As suggested earlier, the two primary models for a playwriting workshop are the workshop that is geared toward the play, such as the regional theatre developmental programs, and the workshop that is geared toward the writer, in which writers gather weekly in order to work on their plays, and develop their unique voices. With the Bloc, the writers attended sessions every week in an apartment, thereby creating a community of trust and reliance. Furthermore, as the Bloc included actors and directors, members of the Bloc learned to think theatrically, which I argue allowed the writers to consider production from the moment they joined the group, unlike previous workshop models.

Finally, as the Bloc did not produce, nor did it “invite an audience” to hear the work, there was an understanding that the writers, actors and directors involved with the Bloc were interested in developing a common craft, language, and most importantly, a community. Although the Bloc did not have a production apparatus, I argue that members of the Bloc grew confident in their craft, which helped them navigate the regional theatre circuit and achieve

mainstream visibility. However, I argue that the success of the Bloc does not rest solely with member productions, but rather includes the creation of their own artistic community.

## JEFFREY SWEET AND THE NEW YORK WRITERS' BLOC

Jeffrey Sweet was an emerging dramatic critic and non-academic historian. During his undergraduate work (he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Film from New York University in 1971), Sweet was invited to the National Critics Institute at the O'Neill Conference in 1970 (although he has led workshops and seminars at the O'Neill Conference, Sweet has never had a play developed there). During the 1970s, Sweet wrote a number of shorter plays (including a musical), but spent the better portion of his time creating his book *Something Wonderful Right Away: An Oral History of the Second City and The Compass*. With the Playwrights Unit, Sweet sought to hone his craft as a dramatist, as he already had the makings of training to be a theatre journalist.

The Playwrights Unit did not offer the experience Sweet had hoped for; rather, it set up a kind of competition between the playwrights, one that Sweet suggests is akin to a "Ben Hur chariot race" (Sweet Interview). Part of the issue was that Israel Horovitz, who ran the unit, was also "bringing in his own work" for review, "and if you had the temerity to criticize it frequently he would retaliate by shredding yours in turn" (Sweet *Dramatists Toolkit* 143). Michael Wright, who was a stage manager at the Actors Studio between 1977 and 1979, was having similar thoughts about the process:

[I]f a given playwright's work didn't come off the page easily, it was immediately questioned as to whether it had any quality, and there wasn't any time spent on investigating what was going on with that particular set of pages. It either worked or it didn't. I thought that was too binary. I thought there was a huge middle ground they weren't exploring. (Wright Interview)



This notion of whether or not a script had quality, and the limited amount of investigation vis-à-vis work that did not “come off the page easily,” was continuing the tradition of streamlining plays to meet a single aesthetic at the Actors Studio. The aesthetic streamlining of the works, teamed up with the sense of competition that was spurred by the PU’s director, Horovitz, led Sweet to decide to create a workshop that operated outside of the auspices of the Actors Studio. Wright, who had worked on a couple of scripts with Sweet at the Playwrights Unit, was approached to form a new group with Sweet.

In 1978, the Encompass Theatre (an Off-Off Broadway company) produced Jeffrey Sweet’s *Porch*. Having been dissatisfied with the Playwrights Unit, Sweet asked the Encompass to allow him to “start a unit following my own principles in the Encompass space” (Sweet Email). After a few months, however, there was “a polite divorce” (Sweet Email). The playwrights continued to meet in “apartments” and “borrowed spaces.” (Sweet Email).

Donald Marguiles was another member of the Bloc. Like Sweet, he was also disappointed with developmental programs at that time. As an MFA in Creative Writing student at Brooklyn college, Marguiles felt stifled: “Initially I listened to feedback far too much. But what invariably happened in those early days is that I didn’t find my play, I lost it; I lost sight of the play I was attempting to write” (30). Frustrated with the practices of developmental programs and dropping out of Brooklyn College, Marguiles called his mentor at SUNY Purchase, Julius Novack, and asked if he could recommend an alternative:

He [Novack] put me in touch with Jeffrey Sweet who, coincidentally, was in the process of organizing a writers’ unit for the Encompass Theatre, a tiny off-off Broadway space on West 48<sup>th</sup> Street above a topless bar. It was in the fall of 1978 that the group that would come to be known as The New York Writers’ Bloc came into existence. (33)

The name “Writers’ Bloc” is, of course, a pun. It suggests that writers sometimes get stuck, and thus need an environment in which to grow. As Sweet recounts in *The Dramatist’s Toolkit*, “When the group began, I wanted to call it Negotiating Stage[...] but Anne Meara, who was a member for several years, instantly said, “That’s the most pretentious fucking thing I’ve ever heard! Someone else came up with the name the Writers’ Bloc, and that stuck” (144).

It should be noted that Anne Meara, whom Sweet references, was an actor. Unlike the Playwrights Unit at the Actors Studio, the Bloc invited actors and directors to participate in exercises and the creation of scripts. This is a marked change from the ideology of the Playwrights Unit, where actors were brought in only if pieces were being presented in front of members. At the Playwrights Unit, the actors often read cold, and therefore, any subtlety in the script would be lost as subtext would become text. However, with the Bloc, actors were an essential and welcome component of the process. One of these actors was Jane Anderson, whom I interviewed in preparation for this chapter in the summer of 2010. Anderson suggests that the Bloc was invaluable for her as an actress, and ultimately, as a writer. Anderson remembers:

I joined The Bloc, because [...] when you’re an actress, you’re always looking for material to do. So, I thought ‘oh, cool, I’ll join this group and I’ll meet playwrights and directors.’ I was in the first play that put David [Mamet] on the map at the Cherry Lane Off-Broadway, but what I found most interesting in my experience in being in the play was the rehearsal process, and deconstructing David’s words and getting to the subtext. And I found I was much more interested in the written experience than acting. And I think I suspected subconsciously that I was really meant to be a writer. (Anderson Interview)

Word of mouth spread quickly about this new playwriting workshop that was open to actors and directors as well. In an email, Jeffrey Sweet listed the early members of the Bloc:

Mark and Bobbi Gordon (a couple), Keith Gordon (their talented son), [...] Percy Granger, [actors] Jerry Stiller and Anne Meara, Connie Kaplan, Kate Draper, Lynn Kadish. Matt Whitten came along later, as did David Copelin, occasionally Emily Mann [now the Artistic Director of the McCarter Theatre] and Corinne

Jacker. Except for summer breaks, we started strong and kept going for about ten years. (Sweet Email)

The New York Writers' Bloc began meeting in the fall of 1978 at Jane Anderson's apartment (Marguiles 33). Anderson had "a one bedroom in 72<sup>nd</sup> on Broadway" on the West-side.

Anderson notes, "My living room wasn't large by my living standards today, but back then we were all living in closet-sized spaces... About ten or twenty of us would gather in my living room, and I'd have coffee and cookies, and we'd get to work" (Anderson Interview). Sweet remembers, "We were there a lot. But we bounced around a lot, as people's apartments opened up, somebody would say 'geez, this is a long commute for me, can we do a couple of them at my house?'" At one point, the Circle in the Square (uptown) offered them a space, as a "community outreach thing" (Sweet Interview).

They would also meet in Susan Merson's apartment. Merson had been an actor looking to make connections with up-and-coming playwrights in New York City. Looking back at the Bloc, Merson writes in her blog:

Meeting for over 15 years, the Bloc gave rise to Jane's career, along with most of the writers who wrote the Disney films throughout the 1990's, as well as fiction stand outs like Janet Fitch (WHITE OLEANDERS). Countless other playwrights, fiction and film writers went through the group and the process over the years. Meeting privately in Jane's home for the first five years and in my home for the balance of the time, the Bloc provided intelligent and compassionate support for writers moving into their strength. (Merson)

Two of the guiding factors with the Bloc were "intelligence and compassionate support," which was lacking at other developmental programs. By involving actors and directors with the genesis of their scripts, the Bloc geared writers to think theatrically. In other words, to think of scripts as part of a larger production component, even though the Bloc did not have a built-in production mechanism. Rather, it was a community of theatre practitioners interested in aiding one another

in the creation of new work, finding each unique voice, building lasting relationships, and creating a community.

This look back at the creation of the New York Writers' Bloc should provide an understanding of where the writers, actors, and directors involved were coming from: the playwrights were looking to create alternatives for themselves from the developmental programs that diminished their function, some members were directors who had built relationships with playwrights, and some members, like Jane Anderson, were actors looking to make connections to writers. In short, they were a company looking to create theatre in an environment that was nurturing and democratic. To be clear, the playwrights involved were not looking to be molly-coddled. Rather, they were looking to work in an environment that was grounded in respect and trust. What were their working methodologies? How did they approach new material in a way that was different than previous models? In what ways can we measure the success of the Bloc?

## IMPROVISATION AND PLAYWRITING: A STEP AWAY FROM THE STATUS QUO

As argued throughout this dissertation, developmental programs and playwriting workshops operate to serve the needs of others (actors, corporate grants, etc.), rather than the playwright. Furthermore, playwrights are pushed away from notions of theatricality by creating works more suited for reader's theatre. The Bloc is unique in regards to playwriting workshops due to Jeffrey Sweet's strong interest in improvisation. Perhaps his most recognized work is *Something Wonderful Right Away: An Oral History of the Second City and the Compass Players*. Throughout this book and most of Sweet's publications, there are generous nods to the improvisation games (known as Theatre Games) of teacher and improviser Viola Spolin and her son Paul Sills, who was the co-founder of Second City Chicago with Howard Alk and Bernie

Sahlins. The Compass Players was led by Del Close, who created the “Harold,” a long-form improvisation technique that builds an entire show (of skits and vignettes) based on an audience suggestion of a title or theme for the evening.

Viola Spolin was drawn to theatre, as well as the (improvised) games she had seen developed for new urban populations (geared to help immigrants adjust to big-city life). She believed improvisation was an excellent tool for education, and developed theatre games as a pedagogy. As a theatre director, Spolin did not “impose blocking and bits of business” on actors, but rather allowed the actors to find “solutions to dramatic problems [that] originated out of their own imaginations” via the “idea of playing games” (Sweet “The Innovators...”). In Spolin’s words, from her book *Improvisation for the Theater*:

The game is a natural group form providing the involvement and personal freedom necessary for experiencing. Games develop personal technique and skills necessary for the game itself, *through playing*. Skills are developed at the very moment a person is having all the fun and excitement playing a game has to offer—that is the exact time one is truly open to receive them [emphasis added]. (4-5)

For Spolin, the participant in the exercise is learning his or her skill the moment he or she accepts the offer to play the game. Also, by using the terms “game,” “playing,” and “freedom,” a participant (for this study, the playwright) has agency, and is unencumbered by the rhetoric of “good drama” v. “bad drama.”

In an *American Theatre* article by Todd London, “Spolin and Sills Laid Down the Rules. The Generations Who Came After Played by Them. That’s How Chicago Invented Itself,” London argues (as the rather lengthy title states) that the imaginative play fostered by Spolin and Sills created Chicago theatre, and in a way, created Chicago’s Jewish Identity:

Each [theatre/improvisational] game centers on one aspect of imaginative reality: transforming space, fashioning objects out of air, creating a “where.” The rules provide the player with a clear focus or “point of concentration.” By keeping their “eyes on the ball” and staying within the rules, the players free themselves to act

spontaneously and creatively in the imaginary world. Moreover, they learn to share space, to take impulses for action off of others, to give and take. Spolin's work provides an alternative to American versions of Stanislavsky's writings on actor training. In the Russian's methods, the actor is motivated by internal needs and desires; the character is the actor's creation. The games, on the other hand, allow character - an extension of the player's self - to emerge spontaneously, as the performer plays with others. The motivation is built in; action is generated not from psychology but from contact with others in space. Moreover, the improvisational nature of the games roots the actor in what Spolin calls "time present." According to Sheldon Patinkin, artistic director of the National Jewish Theater in suburban Skokie and artistic consultant to Second City, the games "give the actors a sense of what it means to behave publicly as opposed to acting. And all you have to do is follow the rules." (London)

The idea of character/personal motivation developing by existing in space touches on two of Spolin's "sayings" in the introduction to *Improvisation for the Theatre*: first, "When we bring space into existence, we come into existence"; and second, "Games and story bring out self rather than ego" (Spolin xv). Method-based acting relies on the ego and explorations of personal psychology in order to create an emotional need for a character, whereas improvisation relies on external forces – space, and most importantly, other people – to bring out a sense of self, a performative self that is defined by action with others, not authoritarian control of circumstances. David Krasner has a similar line of thinking. In "I Hate Strasberg," the introduction to *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory, Practice, Future*, Krasner says:

In Method acting, actors are recognized as beings guided by their own intentions; in contrast, non-Method acting frequently views actors as subject to the imposition of external events. [...] The Method maintains that actors are free to perform and *control* actions and to determine their goals and objectives. This control, says [Lee] Strasberg [who developed Method-based acting, adapted from the principles of Stanislavski], "is the foundation of the actor's creativity [emphasis added]." (17).

It should be noted that Krasner is actually defending Method-based acting, and the Method-actor's desire to *control* external circumstances in the service of fulfilling an emotional need (or "objective"). With improvisation, however, performers give over any sense of control vis-à-vis a

circumstance, in order to build relationships via acting in cooperation with the other participants in the game.

For Sweet, this latter approach, one of playing games in order to create a theatre that involves an extension of an active-self, with actors working together in a codified and mutually created (imagined) space, became life-changing. (This is a marked change from the way actors improvised off of a script at the Playwrights Unit, a point I shall return to.) As Sweet states, “Most of my ideas about the theoretical underpinnings of the theatre have their roots in [Spolin’s] explorations” (“The Innovators...”).

In “The Elements of Improvisation: Structural Tools for Spontaneous Theatre,” Nicolas J. Zaunbrecher draws the dividing line between “improvisation as a category of actions” and “improvisation as a method for action” (49). Whereas the former involves spur-of-the-moment thinking in day-to-day life (which, for Zaunbrecher, includes actors ad-libbing if they forget their lines), the latter “method for action,” is not a means of dealing with an unforeseen complication (in life or on stage), but rather “is deliberate and agreed-upon by its performers as a pre-given structure, not a fallback position enacted when a prescribed performance fails” (49).

Zaunbrecher furthermore states, with improvisational theatre, the performer’s body (including voice) is itself the experienced site of performance content” (49). While it is commonplace that a body is a codified “text” in performance, the structured improvisational exercises used by the Bloc as a means of playwriting *pedagogy* suggest that a play-text should be a codebook for behavior, moving away from the dialogue-driven plays of the Actors Studio’s Playwrights Unit.

Although the environment of the Bloc was incredibly nurturing, the use of theatre games as a means of creating scripts and “solving problems” (a term Sweet uses when he is stuck with a

particular scene) does not suggest that the writer was free to do what he or she liked without a set of guidelines or practices. Improvisation is, as London suggests, an incredibly structured art. As Zaunbrecher says:

An easy rallying call for improv has long been that it is somehow “freer,” or less limiting, than scripted theatre. This is misleading. The limitations work differently, and we should respect them for what they are, not try to pretend that they are less of a factor. Limitation in improv is not just a fact—it is essential and valuable. Many sorts of value can be generated in improv: entertainment, aesthetic, spiritual, educational, practical, moral and so on. These are all great, but the values of spontaneity formally inherent to improv depend upon limitation for their generation, and thus also do all the secondary values improv can generate. Rather than try to free ourselves from limitation, we should recognize it and work with it. The question should be “What do you want the show to accomplish, and how can that be facilitated by purposeful employment of limitation?” (54)

By using an improvisational structure (i.e., theatre games), there is the suggestion that members of the Bloc were writing, more-or-less, a form of realism. However, unlike its Actors Studio counter-part, this playwriting workshop encouraged actors to write and writers to act in improvisational scenarios, allowing everyone to experience the body in motion, the subtleties of gesture, and the creation of *subtext* rather than on-the-nose-text. If there were emotional explosions in the improvisations, they were more *organic* and less forced than the cold improvisations featured at the Actors Studio. Plus, when actors improvised off the text at the Actors Studio, it was often because it was deemed by the *actors* that the script was not “working,” even though the actors often had no previous experience with the play. The actors would look for and find problems within a play, and gear the writer away from the movement of the body, and away from subtext.

Coupled with the actors’ role of problem-finder is the idea that the playwright must be inherently *wrong* in the decisions he or she is making for the characters. With improvisation, two of Spolin’s sayings, as remembered by Paul Sills, are “Approval/disapproval is keeping you from



a direct experience,” and “Success/failure is a side product of the approval/disapproval syndrome. Trying to succeed or giving into failure drains us” (Spolin iii). With improvisation, success occurs when a participant is playing the game; skill as a writer is developed over time, while, to be blunt, having fun playing each game.

One of the most intriguing improvisational writing exercises was the Six Line, which, according to Michael Wright, “encouraged everyone to write just for the hell of it” (Email).

Wright remembers:

After we had met for about a year, some of us non-writers began to want to try some writing without having to go through the horrors of a critique. This was when the six-line was introduced. (*Process* 15).

The Six Line was created by Jeffrey Sweet, rooted in an improvisation game for actors.

Sweet describes:

Mostly it was a way of getting the non-writers in the group to start writing. Everybody every week was responsible for bringing in a scene six lines long -- three pairs of exchanges between two people. We would assign each other topics sometimes. I found that almost nobody was too timid to write six lines. And frequently, empowered by the success of six lines, actors indeed became writers. (Sweet Email to the PlaywrightsBinge)

In his article in *Playwrights Teach Playwriting*, Donald Marguiles remembers:

We began each meeting with the presentation of a brief exercise called Six Line consisting of just six exchanges of dialogue between two people. This way everyone is represented each week, with “appetizers” that are short and sweet. I learned in the Bloc the importance of feeding the investment of a group through the work of the individuals. Six Lines seemed to do that; everyone looked forward to hearing not only their own efforts but those of their colleagues as well. We would come up with a single word or phrase – “First Love” comes to mind – and everyone would write his or her six exchanges of dialogue based on that phrase. Some of my early efforts grew out of these explorations. (28-29)

Susan Merson also highlights the Six Line:

Everyone, he [Sweet] felt, was capable of writing at least six lines of dialogue. So, every week we would choose a topic and every week everyone would bring in no more than two pages double-spaced on the topic. From these simple exercises

emerged major motion pictures and several works of published fiction. Six Lines gave a writer permission to write no holds barred. No criticism, no negatives. Just write and it will be heard. (“Teaching Philosophy”)

While Merson suggests there were “no holds barred,” I would argue that there were no holds-barred within the structural framework of an improvised game. That is, a theatre game offers participants the freedom to explore and discover, while maintaining fidelity to the guiding framework of the particular game. For example, one principle of improvisation (found in the works of Spolin, Sweet, Keith Johnstone, and other key instructors of improvisation) is the use of reincorporation. In summary, to reincorporate something means to bring an element from the start of a piece back into the ending to provide a kind of narrative framework for that particular game (or script). Again, the writing participant was certainly free, but there were structures in place meant to guide the writer (actor, or director).

Although Sweet and Wright were dissatisfied with the ideology of the Actors Studio, where the playwright is there to serve the actors’ need to emote, and the Playwrights Unit, where playwrights were put in competition with one another, they found the method of bringing in ten pages at a time to be very useful. First, it allowed each playwright (and actor and director) to have some of his or her work read/performed by fellow members during each meeting session. Second, it opened up avenues of discovery where, if they wanted, playwrights could ask actors to improvise a scenario loosely based on the objectives of the characters in the specific ten-page scene.

## THEATRICALITY AND COMMUNITY

As mentioned earlier, plays developed with the Actors Studio Playwrights Unit were sometimes given readings in front of members of the Actors Studio. Because the readings were

often cold, the actors had little familiarity with the script. Furthermore, the actor's process is markedly different than the process of the improviser, as suggested by London's article: that is, the Method-based actor works from personal psychology, whereas the improviser creates the "action" of the piece through "contact with others in space" (London). Another difference between the Actors Studio and the Bloc was the way in which the actors and playwrights worked with one another. At the Actors Studio, playwrights had little involvement with actors during the workshop process. The Bloc, as Michael Wright explains:

[...] went a step further [than the Unit as lead by Horovitz] by including actors and directors as members. Consequently, the Bloc's critiques were more focused on craft questions and issues, having to do with an actor saying, for example, "I was able to pursue my objective in this scene very clearly until this line, where I contradict everything I'd said previously." This gave the writer essential input that was not about trying to rewrite the playwright's work but came from an artist who might be responsible for trying to make something truthful in production. It was about working theatrically. (Wright *Process* 15).

To work *theatrically*, for Wright, is to recognize a script as one component of production. This idea of working theatrically was a new addition to the workshop model, creating the sense that the writer was not working in a literary vacuum, but creating something that had three dimensions (with the use of actors and directors). Furthermore, actors and directors would learn the craft of the writer, in order to fully engage in a common vocabulary. The common vocabulary, or theatrical language, would lead to the development of the Bloc-as-community.

The notions of *theatricality* and *community* offer a marked change with the regional theatre's developmental programs. Because members of the Bloc included actors and directors, the playwrights learned the vocabulary of the actor, and were free to hone their craft and make discoveries without the pressures of corporate sponsors, or ideological control of their work via talk-back sessions. Furthermore, because there was a sense of play via the improvisational games, the members of the Bloc were able to create their own community, one which welcomed

writers of various skill levels. The Bloc met for three to four hours per session, but as they became more invested in one another's lives, they would spend an additional two to three hours to get coffee, talk, and socialize. This is an important aspect of the Bloc because, as Sweet notes, a playwright "need[s] to have a community base or you feel like a lone gun slinger. With very few bullets" (Sweet Interview). Donald Marguiles remembers:

In the beginning, Jeffrey [Sweet], as the organizer of the group, set the tone of our discourse and did a remarkable job of bringing people together. But as the group matured it outgrew the single-moderator format and, in order to survive and flourish, adopted a rotating system so that from week to week a different member of the core group was responsible for moderating critiques. (34)

Unlike the Playwrights Unit at the Actors Studio, each member had the opportunity to lead discussion for the evening. This helped steer the participants away from the kind of dictatorship that Horovitz had created. Furthermore, members of the Bloc were taught *how* to critique one another's work, which had been (and still is) lacking in new play development sessions.

Anderson describes:

Jeff's rule was that when you critiqued each other's work, you never say what YOU would write, you would always try to ask what the writer wanted to convey, and help/let them know if they succeeded with that. And that formula was what makes these kind of groups so successful. I've taken part in workshops that have been sponsored by theatres, with a formal dramaturge and with some people offering criticism, and I've often found that workshops are more destructive than helpful because it makes the playwright go in all kinds of directions that he or she never wanted to go in order to please the opinions of directors [others]. There was a period of that at the Writer's Bloc. (Interview)

As Anderson and Marguiles suggest, there was a period of time when the Bloc was getting close to the feel of the Playwrights Unit, insofar as Sweet was taking on the role of a leader, rather than a member. The Bloc had to adapt. According to Sweet:

After awhile, there was a bloodless coup; I was toppled from my throne as head of the Bloc and demoted to an equal. After licking my bruised ego, I was delighted to find myself one of a band of friends who continued to meet for almost ten years. (*Dramatists Toolkit* 148)

This Feast of St. Crispian-esque “band of friends” created for themselves a nurturing environment, which not only suited their needs, but pushed their boundaries as writers and theatre artists. To reiterate, the New York Writers’ Bloc, as a playwriting workshop geared toward the writer rather than the play, focused on the individual writer’s craft, building a life-long confidence for members, while creating networking opportunities among the various actors, directors, and designers who participated.

Although the Writers’ Bloc was not a producing organization, it provided a comfortable arena for writers to experiment, hone their craft, and though this may sound callow, to have fun. A version of the New York Writers’ Bloc continues to this day in Los Angeles, under Jane Anderson. When reflecting on the the Bloc, Sweet says “Here’s the kicker: it was run with no grants, no funding, no larger sheltering organization. It survived entirely on the most minuscule of dues – a couple of bucks a month per person to cover the cost of coffee and pastries. If the Bloc proves anything, it is that you don’t need much to begin and sustain a vibrant and productive workshop. All that is necessary is a handful of idealistic, committed individuals and a living room big enough to hold them and their enthusiasm” (148).

While there was no set manifesto for the group, Susan Merson recounts some of the (spoken and unspoken) rules for the Bloc: “Kindness and support brings talent forth more often than criticism,” “Ignoring flaws in a writer’s work consistently creates blockages for the writer and ennui in the group,” “The more intimately the work was understood by the Bloc, the more helpful the comments for the writer” (“Teaching Philosophy”). While several developmental groups have used the term “support,” this is the first time we encounter the terms “kindness” and “understanding” vis-à-vis the individual writer’s process and the work he or she shares with the

group. The notions of kindness and understanding operate in sharp contrast to the sense of competition (the “Ben Hur Chariot race”) found at the Playwrights Unit.

But how does kindness aid a writer? I would argue that kindness is different from lying to someone about his or her play. That is, part of nurturing in the process of creating art is making mistakes. With the Bloc, an artist is making mistakes in front of other people. However, unlike other developmental programs, the Bloc encourages members to learn from their mistakes in an environment that gives everyone permission to fail. As David Cohen, an adjunct professor of Theatre Arts at SUNY New Paltz once said to me, “If you’re not failing at least fifty percent of the time, you’re not improvising.”

Most importantly, the Bloc created a community, echoing the hopes of Viola Spolin and Paul Sills. As Todd London says, for Paul Sills, “the idea of community supersedes the urge to make theatre. He considers his work ‘para-theatrical.’” (“Spolin”) London continues:

In Sweet's chock-full-oral history of the Compass and Second City, Something Wonderful Right Away, Sills quotes his favorite philosopher, Martin Buber, to explain: "The heavenly bread of self-being is passed between man and man." This interaction is possible in the "freespace" created by the games. Former Sills-protégé Patinkin puts it another way: "When you drop all the life problems and just invest yourself in solving problems within the rules of the game - and since the rules are always about getting what happens next off the person that you're responding to - it creates a sense of community." (London “Spolin”)

With Spolin’s games, there were no winners or losers (that is, no competition). There was a community trying to figure out approaches to the problems of everyday life by creating scenes together; someone would create an imagined environment. Someone else would enter the imagined environment. The imagination operates as an invitation to the other to coexist in the game, and work together to solve a problem. Unlike the Stanislavski system or Method acting, the player in the scene has to work outside of him- or herself by sustaining the imagined world, and by trusting, reacting, and listening to the other player. The idea of listening to another, to

truly engage with an “other” human being, is a valuable practice for both the art of playwriting and the art of building a community.

## CONCLUSION ON THE SUCCESS OF THE NEW YORK WRITERS’ BLOC

When a student takes an introduction to theatre class, it would be a breath of fresh air to read how the playwright is a key member of the theatre community, and how the writer functions with the other disciplines of theatre in order to create collaborative art, and even more important, an artistic community. The playwright would not be an embarrassment during the rehearsal process, but would have a mutual understanding and appreciation with everyone involved with bringing a work into fruition.

While the most immediate mark of playwright success is a production, there are successes located with playwriting workshops which are geared toward the writer, and which give the writer the artistic safety of communal bonds. Artistic safety and communal bonds are absent from the regional theatre, which is why the local, do-it-yourself models can fill the void left by the developmental circuit. Furthermore, while I hesitate to draw a simple line between creating plays in a community such as the New York Writers’ Bloc and a fully-realized production later, I do feel it is necessary to talk about the visibility that members of the Bloc have achieved over the years.

Jane Anderson, who was the first person I interviewed for this chapter, has had a career writing for the stage, screen, and television (*The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom*, AMC’s *MadMen*). Donald Marguiles won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for his play *Dinner with Friends*, which was later adapted into an HBO film starring Dennis Quaid and Andie McDowell. Jerry Stiller, best known to my generation for his recurring

role in *Seinfeld*, already had a visible career as an actor with his wife Anne Meara (as “Stiller and Meara,” they performed in venues around the country, and on television; they were both graduates from Second City). Keith Gordon has directed for a number of television programs, including *Lone Star*. While the success of the group does not need to be gauged via visibility, I cannot ignore the fact that these writers have achieved mainstream attention.

I would also suggest that the confidence that writers built during their years with the Bloc helped them navigate through the various pipelines of American theatre that would lead to visible success. The relationships developed with actors and directors by key members would also lead to production opportunities. Also, because actors and writers were *invited* to improvise and write within the parameters of theatre games, the plays themselves were created with an eye toward theatricality; that is, they were geared toward production, even though the Bloc did not have a production component. Writers grew to trust the impulse of the actor, and just as important, actors grew to trust the impulse of the writer, unlike the Playwrights Unit, where the writer and his or her work was suspect.

In this regard, the Bloc was successful: because the playwrights who participated with the Bloc were constantly building stories with actors and directors, plays were geared toward production (whether that choice was conscious or unconscious) from the very beginning, unlike regional developmental programs which led to works that are better suited for reader’s theatre. The Bloc was writer-driven, rather than work-driven, which is how members were able to gain confidence while working theatrically. The tendency to think theatrically, I believe, helped the playwrights land productions of their work in venues around the country.

Furthermore, the fact that a number of the members are now teachers at major universities suggests that much of the pedagogy developed by Sweet and the Bloc have



permeated the ways in which playwriting is taught in America. Emerging playwrights are now more likely to forge relationships with directors and actors in the development and production of their work, rather than affix a cover letter to a script and send it out to theatres in the hopes that someone will read it (to echo the example that Robert Miller gave the introduction class at SUNY New Paltz). In other words, playwright Jeffrey Sweet built his own playwriting workshop which avoided some of the pitfalls of previous models, and in doing so, paved the way for future generations of American dramatists to think theatrically.

Jeffrey has written two books on playwriting, *The Dramatist's Toolkit* and *Solving Your Script*. He has also taught at the Actors Studio Drama School at New School University, Columbia University, University of Richmond, and has taught with non-degree programs, such as those of Ensemble Studio Theatre and Artistic New Directions.

Michael Wright has also turned to teaching. Wright's teaching philosophy, found in his book *Playwriting in Process: Thinking and Working Theatrically*, is grounded in the idea that there needs to be a common vocabulary between each of the theatrical disciplines: "student actors should try to write plays, student directors should hang lights, and technical students should act; everyone should do it all, especially in their early training" (Wright *Playwriting in Process* 9). This notion of "trying one's hand" at the various elements of theatre carries over from the Bloc to the classroom.

Donald Marguiles has taught at Yale School of Drama. Susan Merson has taught at Cal State Fullerton and Glendale Community College (courses in improvisation and playwriting, suggesting a continuation of the Bloc). In short, these teachers, like the rest of the working professionals associated with the Bloc, are the ones who have inspired the latest generation of playwrights to think and work theatrically.

The Writers' Bloc continued in a West Coast incarnation, under the leadership of Merson, Anderson, and Tony Schultz, from 1985-1995 (Merson "Teaching Philosophy"). Based on her experiences with developing works (and participating as both an actor and writer with the Bloc), Merson states that the "basic guidelines [which are] the most helpful in working with writers" include the "luxury of time, talent, and compassion" ("Teaching Philosophy"). When looking back at the Bloc, Merson concludes:

During most of my time as moderator of the Bloc, I was a colleague and not an instructor. This role began to shift in the last few years of the Bloc as younger and less experienced writers began to join the group. At this time I stepped away as I was still uncomfortable being anyone's teacher. I was fearful of becoming too dogmatic about my work and others. I was there to witness technique in the making but the members who were showing up no longer had the techniques available to them, nor was it there by example and I wasn't about to teach it. ("Teaching Philosophy")

However, these feelings would change as Merson would become involved in the academy.

Merson, like Sweet, Wright and Marguiles, are interested in the process of creating not just new works, but new communities in classroom settings, where students can explore and discover, and are free to make mistakes. This is the legacy left behind by the New York Writers' Bloc, an organization spearheaded by a playwright who wanted agency as an artist, and who wanted a community.

Though the Bloc has left behind a legacy and has had members who have been produced around the country and who now teach exciting approaches to dramatic writing, I do not want to suggest that these are the only ways in which the Bloc was successful. As with theatre games, I argue that the writers, actors and directors were successful from the moment they accepted the offer to play, explore, and make discoveries together. When I consider the success of the Bloc, it could very well be that the most joyous moments were those created in a small apartment in Manhattan, where friendships were forged, and members had an incredible amount of fun. If

more playwriting workshops offered these opportunities, I believe playwrights would feel more welcome in the process of meaning-making in American theatre. Rather than an “embarrassment,” their presence would be commonplace, not in the sense that they are being taken for granted, but in the sense that, as Professor Steve Kistakos argued to his introduction to theatre class when I visited in April, the American theatre could not survive without them.

I want to highlight this optimism with an anecdote, which will lead into my next two chapters. During the 2009 Mid-American Theatre Conference in Chicago, I visited Sweet who was in rehearsal for his play, *Class Dismissed*, at the Victory Gardens’ Biograph Theatre. I asked him how a playwright could get involved with Victory Gardens, and he gave me an anecdote about a young student of Terrence McNally’s who had asked if he could be involved with the Manhattan Theatre Club. McNally’s answer: “build your own fucking theatre.” Against the wishes of authors such as Robert Cohen, that is what the playwright function now entails: not only creating plays, but building new ways to experience the American theatre. With the next two chapters, I will consider McNally’s words, and how the playwright has taken the writer-centered spirit of the New York Writers’ Bloc a step further.

## CHAPTER FIVE BUILD YOUR OWN FUCKING THEATRE!

Whoever calls for rescuing text theatre from the crimes of directing nowadays should remember this historical context. The tradition of the written text is under more threat from museum-like conventions than from radical forms dealing with it.

– Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (52)

There's a kind of shift taking place where there's this old model of sitting at home and writing plays and submitting and hoping someone will fall in love with the script, and waiting at home and hoping someone will fall in love with your play. That hasn't really worked in a long time. I think younger playwrights are learning very quickly that they have to do things themselves, and so they are building relationships with people they see eye to eye with and building relationships that work.

– Roland Tec Interview

### ECONOMICS AND AESTHETICS

In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann argues that there is a form of theatre built on theatrical *aesthetics*, free from Modernist notions of good drama (or, for Lehmann, the “frame of dramatic and narrative logic” (55)). The rise of the director (Robert Wilson, Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook) frees theatre from the “museum-like conventions” which ultimately grind drama into antiquity, or non-action (passive spectatorship) (52). While Lehmann's championing of the director as a kind of ritualist (empty of its mythical/theological tendencies), in lieu of a playwright who creates a fixed text (museum piece), there is value to the suggestion that plays, especially in America, have been fixed into a kind of literary tradition that pushes dramatic writers away from notions of theatricality by moving the writer away from the other disciplines of theatrical practice. Workshops, and in particular, workshops which culminate in public readings as a form of readers'-theatre (process-as-product), further entrench the play-text-as-museum-piece, at the same time keeping the play (and playwright) away from

innovative directors. Because pieces that are developed for readings focus only on the dialogue, theatricality is lost. Plays that may feature elements of the postdramatic theatre (non-linear pieces, pieces which are non-narrative, pieces which leave room for elements of dance, puppetry, etc.) do not stand a chance in the process-as-product model. Furthermore, because readings are incredibly inexpensive, plays which are not dialogue-driven works of realism are rarely considered (if considered at all) for a staged-reading, as a piece that relies on the movement of the body would not translate well without the production apparatus.

One of the reasons highlighted for the rise of developmental programs *sans* production has been economics. As Janet Neipris has suggested, the notion of having a reading with the right theatre company is tantamount to an Off-Broadway production, and this has supposedly answered the question of visibility/status for the playwright function, while keeping an eye toward dwindling funding (*TheatreFace*). However, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, a playwright only learns his or her craft by working toward a production, and productions, as Michael Wright has suggested, help a playwright to learn to think theatrically. Thinking theatrically (via rehearsal-and-production) will move the play-text away from notions of antiquity, as fully-realized performance and the full use of a three-dimensional codified space will engage audience members as spectators, rather than as diagnosticians seeking to solve implicit problems in a text. But what are the funding realities for a production? How can a playwright attain productions when the sources for funding are dwindling? Is there one kind of production that is more legitimate than another?

In this chapter, I am going to highlight the current crisis in arts management and funding, as well as the implicit ideas of national drama. I want to propose a different model, with different economic aims and different notions of community—local over national. Furthermore, I will

look at how changing economics and rhetorics change the look and work of the twenty-first century playwright. To that end, I will begin with an overview of Rocco Landesman's recent comments at the Arena Theatre in Washington, D.C. I will then look at two theatre production models which situate the playwright-as-producer. As I will suggest, these models *begin* with the playwright taking charge as producer or artistic director of his or her own work, and, in the name of thinking theatrically, bringing in directors, designers, and other creative disciplines in the production apparatus. With these models in mind, I suggest that the playwright function *as part* of the larger production apparatus will become commonplace and American drama will move away from museum-like conventions that create the never-ending process-as-product.

#### ROCCO LANDESMAN AND THE NEA

In January 2010, Rocco Landesman, a former Broadway producer (and former owner of the company that owns and operates five Broadway theatres, including the Eugene O'Neill ("Biography for NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman")), and current chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, considered the current financial crisis that the arts face in the wake of a GOP call to end the NEA once and for all. On Thursday, January 27, Landesman made a comment during a New Play Development panel at Arena Stage in Washington D.C. that sent the theatre community into an uproar. In short, when looking at struggling theatres, he stated: "You can either increase demand or decrease supply. Demand is not going to increase, so it is time to think about decreasing supply" (qtd. Pogrebin). The suggestion that theatre needs to downsize, of course, stirs the passions of many, and the "blogosphere" was rife with come-backs, suggestions, lamentations, and thoughts of how smaller theatres would survive without federal

funding (it should be noted that even known development organizations, such as The Seven Devils Conference in Idaho, have just announced that they will be closing their doors forever).

Landesman defended his position in both *The New York Times* article reporting on his comments and his official blog for the NEA. In the January 28 issue of the *Times*, journalist Robin Pogrebin quotes Landesman:

There is a disconnect that has to be taken seriously — our research shows that attendance has been decreasing while the number of the organizations have been proliferating. [...] That's a discussion nobody wants to have [...] There might be too many resident theaters — it is possible [...] At least we have to talk about it. (qtd. Pogrebin)

Pogrebin's article concludes, "Foundations and agencies like the endowment should perhaps reconsider re-allocating their resources, he [Landseman] said, perhaps giving larger grants to fewer institutions" (Pogrebin). The suggestion that fewer institutions should be granted funding, I argue, would ensure the low-affect, "good drama," calcified by Ivy-League institutions, with a backlash against not only the avant-garde, but any theatre (and theatre practitioner) that lacks national visibility. This concern is not without warrant. As Dower suggests in the "White Pages":

At present the distribution of philanthropic resources is heavily balanced in favor of the major institutions. The majority of the activity and opportunity, however, falls outside this segment and is being supported by —sweat equity at levels of activity that are not sustainable. Compensation levels for artists, especially as compared to the administrators, also appear to be out of balance throughout this sector. Institutions of all sizes, however, struggle to pay meaningful wages to artists involved in the development processes. (6)

Although most institutions are struggling, the ones that receive aid are the largest institutions (which include the Actors Theatre of Louisville and Arena Stages where London, Pesner, and Voss conducted most of their studies for *Outrageous Fortune*). As downtown New York City theatres continue to close, it can be certain that whatever funding remains will go to the

organizations that have visibility, and who develop “good drama.” In short, this is an economic reinforcement of the dominant aesthetic.

In an online discussion forum (the *playwrightsbinge*), Thomas Klocke has stated that the conversation of art not providing a consumer return is “silly,” as “the economic development argument has annually been trumpeted to support government budget requests” (*playwrightsbinge*). Klocke continues:

Drop a thousand dollars of art stimulus into a community and through extrapolation you end up with ten thousand or one hundred thousand dollars of economic development. You pick a number and I can probably reach it through tickets sold, jobs created, tourist spending, or in Rocco's case, non-profits [theaters] created. (Klocke)

He concludes, “Landesman (...) has been Broadway producer for years. The NEA budget for 2009 was \$155m. *Spiderman [Turn off the Dark]*, the musical, the most expensive of all time, is projected at \$65m. I've got to wonder how rooted his feet are in the non-profit arts movement” (Klocke). This is a valid point: the commercial (i.e., “capitalist”) rhetoric has invaded the not-for-profit theatres, even as Broadway is attempting to mount the most expensive musical of all time (despite a number of actor injuries, calls for OSHA investigations, etc.). However, corporate America invaded theatres years ago, as suggested throughout this study, although Klocke's is valid, it quickly becomes moot. Furthermore, it may be a dangerous approach to argue against capitalist rhetoric *with more* capitalist rhetoric. Klocke indicates a defensive stance, a stance that playwrights are all too used to thanks to the never-ending-workshops, and diminishing confidence as their role-as-artist stands in the shadow of theatrical mechanism that calls their function into question.

In the official blog for the NEA, *Art Works*, Landesman tried both to defend his position and placate stirred passions. In this blog, he writes:



Diane Ragsdale and I discussed the intersection of the commercial and not-for-profit theaters. We talked about the original impulse behind the resident theater movement in this country, the increasing role of commercial investment in shaping not-for-profit theaters' seasons, and the too limited definition of success in use by many theaters today (attendance + revenue + national attention). (*Art Works*)

I would note here that Landesman has set up the normative definition of success, one, given his tone in this blog, it seems that he does not necessarily agree with; this does beg the question,

“What is a success to Landesman?” He continues:

When we released the SPPA results [*NEA's 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*] at a meeting of more than 40 national service organizations in December 2009, I said that anyone who hears these two numbers has to ask about balancing the equation, which means either increasing demand or, yes, maybe decreasing supply. I have made this same observation to a number of audiences, but at Arena, the conversation finally took off. So I decided to write this blog post—not to retract or walk back the observation (as some hope I will do)—but to encourage us to keep having the conversation. (*Art Works*)

As mentioned above, one of the key components of this conversation had to do with cutting a number of grants to theatres, though Landesman suggests that it does not have to do with size, but rather audience demand. He goes on to make several suggestions to theatre organizations that wish to stay vital: “Increase arts education,” “Take advantage of related demand,” “Offer free samples,” and last, “Examine our arts infrastructure” (*Art Works*)

Of the first suggestion, “Increase arts education,” Landesman assumes a built-in audience. That is, while I agree that arts education is incredibly important, how much can an institution under a grant from the NEA offer? That is, with the much publicized “Decency Clause,” would a theatre be able to educate an audience on the importance of queer theory or of true acceptance of others by performing samples by *Split Britches*? Or, would only sanitized works (especially “good drama”/ “good art”) be trumpeted, while performance groups that do not fall in with a horizon of expectations fall to the side? The second point, “Take advantage of

related demand,” has to do with the aesthetic tastes of current popular culture. Landeman suggests:

As we are watching audiences at not-for-profit arts organizations shrink, we are seeing an explosion of demand for singing and dancing. Prime time network television is filled with *Dancing With the Stars*, *American Idol*, *Glee*, and *So You Think You Can Dance*. (*Art Works*)

While Landeman advises against “dumbing down” the arts to meet expectations created by television (a “high art” versus “low art” divide is very present in this blog), he does trumpet the aesthetics of song and dance, which is found in the Broadway musical. Again, an aesthetic judgment is being pushed: if a theatre wants to survive, it needs to offer musicals.

The other masked belief in Landesman’s response is that theatre is a national, rather than local, phenomenon. For scholars such as Bradley Boney, theatre functions outside of what he calls “mass [i.e., “popular” or “national”] culture”:

As an immediate event, as an ephemeral moment between performer and receiver incapable of moving beyond its local time and space, it has neither the scope, reach, nor reproducibility to participate in the discourse of mass culture. But mass culture is our culture, and the only possible result is that the theatre remains on the outside looking in, or at least pretending to be inside. (10)

As Boney suggests, theatre cannot possibly tie itself to the larger media vis-à-vis audience building and national exposure. Outside of “drama departments” which “actually produce plays,” Boney notices a dearth of popular conversations that highlight actual theatre practice. This is not to suggest that theatre is a form of “old culture” (as mentioned in chapter two), but rather, that it is theatre’s locality which makes it vital to the immediate community (10).

The final point in Landeman’s response, “Examine our arts infrastructure,” is without a doubt the most important to this dissertation:

Do we need three administrators for every artist? Resident theaters in this country began as collectives of artists. They have become collectives of arts administrators. Do we need to consider becoming more lightly institutionalized in

order to get more creativity to more audiences more often? It might also allow us to pay artists more. (*Art Works*)

This point is entirely agreeable. Landesman is looking to downsize the arts administration (which would include literary managers and dramaturges, a cut that London, Posner, and Voss would champion); however, what I would argue, in the name of “art-over-commerce”, is a retooling of the NEA itself, and the removal of a commercial, Broadway producer as its chair. Or, in a worst case scenario, I would advocate cutting the NEA in order to move away from institutionalized notions of “good drama” and “good (i.e., “sanitized”) art.”

During my interview with Michael Bigelow Dixon, I asked him about his reactions to Landesman’s comments. He had not heard the comments directly, but considered the role of small and community-oriented theatres:

I find the recent creation of small and community-oriented non-profit arts organizations to be really hopeful. I believe that young theatre professionals will adapt to the changing needs of their communities, initially for their survival, but also for their conversation with the public through a play. I definitely don’t think every organization needs to be a LORT theatre; I think graduates coming from Goucher College, where I teach, are looking at a cultural landscape that’s quite different from what people were looking at in the seventies and eighties. The *terra nova* of the current landscape is more community-oriented and opportunities abound for artists to serve the public in many, many ways. I suspect Mr. Landesman’s comment was too narrow in scope to adequately address the vast topography of his subject, which includes the quantity, quality and variety of artistic endeavors, public engagement, financial resources, and economic recession, as well as trends, taste and the wide range of contributions theatres offer to an individual, a community, and a country. (Dixon Interview)

Dixon’s comments are vital, as they highlight the inherent problem with situating theatre within a national discourse rather than as a local phenomenon; furthermore, Dixon champions the small and community theatres which have been spreading around the country, and which serve the direct needs of both the local community and the playwright. Dixon’s remarks in support of “community-oriented” theatre organizations also suggest, as Jill Dolan has indicated (and as I

quoted in chapter three), that if theatre surveys considered organizations that were not necessarily LORT, the topography of the American theatre would prove to be much more nuanced, and much more artistically active than the national reports (including the “White Pages” and *Outrageous Fortune*) have suggested.

I have spent some time looking at the tensions at the national level of funding for the arts. As I move forward in this chapter, I want to consider theatre as a local and immediate event, between performer (in production) and spectator. I also want to consider the ways in which self-production models have cut out administrative “middle-men” by asking playwrights not only to produce, but to serve as Artistic Directors of their own shows (responsible for the hiring of directors and assembling of creative/design teams, along with marketing and fundraising). According to Roland Tec, the Director of Membership with The Dramatists Guild, a number of playwrights are already finding the benefits of self-production:

I think you can trace it to several sources. One I think is that over the past 25 years government funding of the arts has been shrinking steadily, so there have been fewer and fewer opportunities for production in traditional ways; also, I think you have more and more interest in writing theatre; there’s an ever increasing number of people writing plays while there’s a shrinking pool of money to produce those plays. So, that’s a recipe for people having to do it themselves. (Tec Interview)

I argue, with the “do-it-yourself” models, the playwright-as-producer not only secures an important position in the theatrical production apparatus, but also, out of a tendency to “think theatrically,” creates drama *with* fellow practitioners, which has made the twenty-first-century American drama vital and vibrant. With this notion in mind (i.e., theatre as a local phenomenon) I will highlight the practices of two production companies that follow Terrence McNally’s advice to “build your own fucking theatre.”

## PLAYWRIGHT AS PRODUCER

On February 8, 2011, I attended the “Self-Production Panel” hosted by The Dramatists Guild at the Frederick Loewe room in Times Square. The purpose of the panel was to suggest to playwrights that there are alternatives to the model of writing and submission, which historically consisted of writing a play and sending it via query to regional and amateur theatres. The panelists were Rich Orloff, Elyse Singer, Kathleen Wornock, all self-producers, and Dianne Debicella, a founding member of Fractured Atlas, Inc.; the evening was moderated by Roland Tec.

During the course of the evening, a number of valuable pieces of information/resources were available to playwrights: Debicella, for example, is the Program Director and founder of Fractured Atlas, a fiscal sponsorship program made available both to individual artists and larger companies seeking not-for-profit status for a given work or season. In terms of practical advice, the panelists agreed that if playwrights want to gain productions, they must build relationships with directors (i.e., think theatrically). At one point, Elyse Singer, the Founding Artistic Director of the OBIE-winning theatre company, Hourglass Group, asked writers if anyone in the room had forged a relationship with a director. Out of approximately fifty people in attendance, only five raised their hands. The need to meet directors and actors and to volunteer with growing companies became the crux of the conversation.

With dwindling financial support, the American theatre is further pushed into obscurity, as the institutions that will remain funded are those that are the most visible (i.e., those that produce “good drama”). In short, it is vital to the survival of the American theatre that playwrights learn the nuts-and-bolts of production, with the “success stories” in mind as a means

of moving forward. It is my intention, in chapter seven, to re-evaluate what the term “success” means for the playwright, with my analysis of Landesman’s comments in mind.

As suggested by the panelists at the Dramatists’ Guild’s self-production panel, for the twenty-first-century playwright, the dynamics involved in writing a play *include* building a relationship with a director, a producer, an actor, etc. Collaboration between playwrights and other theatre practitioners was one of the essentials for the New York Writers’ Bloc: theatre *is* a community. The twenty-first-century American dramatist has taken this notion a step further by gearing works toward production, rather than operating as a (non-production) home-base for theatre artists.

13P

There are a number of production-based theatre companies that have emerged over the past decade spearheaded by playwrights who have grown tired of the process-as-product mechanism in the American regional theatre. In the July/August 2009 issue of *The Dramatist*, which was dedicated to this call-to-arms, several playwrights were interviewed who are self-producers. Lisa Soland of Granada Hills California argues:

What will happen is that in a very short amount of time, you’ll realize that this is very doable and you will start to lose the idea that your writing career is at the mercy of someone else; someone other than yourself. Your entire nature will change and you will gain strength in your self-reliance. (9)

In other words, Soland believes that “self-reliance” in the mechanism of production builds confidence, both as a writer and as a collaborator. This reclaiming of confidence is essential in order for the American theatre to move away from antiquated notions of “good drama.”

While the article focuses on other organizations that have been created by playwrights, such as the Playwrights Collective in Brooklyn and Playwrights 6 in Los Angeles, the one

company that has come to the fore is 13P, an Off-Off Broadway company that consists of thirteen playwrights. While the history of 13P has become increasingly known in playwriting communities, it has not been fully addressed in scholarship. In 2002, Robert Handel met Madeleine George and Julia Jarcho at the O'Neill Playwrights Conference in 2002. They also met Winter Miller, who was working at the Conference as a literary staff member. Rob Handel remembers:

We were all talking and complaining about our lives as playwrights. I met Ann Washburn through Madeline George, and we came up with this idea of starting a company in order to demonstrate that for the price of doing a series of readings or workshops you could instead do a series of [basic] equity [showcase] productions on a small scale. We invited a bunch of people over [to Miller's apartment] to talk about it, and 13 people showed up [two via phone] and it became 13 P. It was a random group. There wasn't really any aesthetic unity. We were more interested in creating a producing model than anything else. (Handel Interview)

Anne Washburn remembers the excitement in the room when the company was being discussed.

There was a moment when she, and the other members, realized the company would be a reality:

One of the most important things we did as an organization was to determine the order. At that meeting when everybody was there, we worked out the order we would go in. I think that everybody thought it *might* happen. [...] We were calm about when we thought we were going to go. There was something about choosing the order ahead of time which made it easier with going forward. Periodically, we talk to people who want advice in creating their own company, I tell them to make the order ahead of time so there are no worries about people chickening out. (Washburn Interview)

The youngest member in the room was Julia Jarcho, who is now ABD in Rhetoric at U.C.

Berkeley. Jarcho remembers:

I was in college when 13P was formed, and I was not in NYC, but I had met Rob and Madeleine at the O'Neill the summer before, and I had stayed in touch with them. And basically, they asked me if I would be interested, and I was like "yes, of course." For me it started with the conference call. [...] I was the youngest, and it was like these artists I respected were interested in asking me to join their club. (Jarcho Interview)

The club was rounded out by Gary Winter, Sheila Callaghan, Erin Courtney, Anne Marie Healy, Kate E. Ryan, Lucy Thurber, and Sarah Ruhl, with Maria Goyanes acting as the Executive Producer. To be clear, 13P is not “against development,” despite their motto, “We don’t develop plays. WE DO THEM!”, which can be found on their website and in their publicity materials (13P). Rather, what they were fed up with was the cycle of readings offered by regional theatres and developmental workshops that were not geared toward production. Using the Basic Showcase Contract, 13P was able to create a model that was achievable.

The Basic Equity Showcase is a contract available to smaller, not-for-profit New York City companies (which still use the name “Off-Off Broadway,” or “New York Independent Theatre.”) In the July/August 2009 issue of *The Dramatist*, Ralph Sevush, Esq., explains the latest version of the Showcase code, which took effect in May of 2009:

Under the new code, producers will still be limited to 128 hours of rehearsal, but they may now spread those hours out across five weeks, rather than four, and the budget cap for Basic productions has been increased to \$35,000, exclusive of the Equity stipends payable to the actors. Under the “Seasonal” Showcase Code, producers may now also schedule performances for up to a 6-week run (increased from five weeks) with the ticket price cap raised from \$20 to \$25. (Sevush 52)

Furthermore, actors are to be given a food and travel stipend during the rehearsal process and run of the show. As the name “showcase” suggests, Equity does not recognize plays produced by the New York Independent Theatre as “professional productions,” but as opportunities to give actors waiting on professional work exposure to industry. What needs to be addressed, however, is that playwrights are not paid for their work under this model, and most of the staff is comprised of volunteers (Lyons 21). Therefore, if the rest of the team is to be paid, the playwright-producer must be an excellent fundraiser.

For most, the idea of raising between \$20,000 and \$35,000 might be off-putting. Handel found the answer in Jim Baldassare, a press agent who “made the press take us seriously,” and



annual fundraisers, spear-headed by Maria Goyanes, who also serves as the company's executive producer (qtd. Lyons 21). The budget for 13P is approximately \$90,000 a year (21). Handel has offered the following advice: "Groups inspired by our model should know that foundations and governments don't tend to give to new organizations" (22). Therefore, as Steve Lyons has suggested, producers who wish to follow the 13P model "need to develop a reputation and be willing to cultivate a relationship with each grant making institution whose mission is a good fit with your work" (22). In an interview, Handel spoke further about grants:

I think that somewhere, you should go through a workshop process, and dramaturges. It's not worth arguing about. Some people like it, some people don't. The problem is with the economics of it, and I think the Mellon foundation's White Paper says, that if you are taking twenty five thousand from the NEA, and you're doing readings, you're making mistakes. You're not helping anyone's career. You know, that's a separate issue from whether dramaturges or new play development is a good thing. I think it's about money. To change the model, companies need to make commitments to playwrights and plays. (Handel Interview)

Here, Handel highlights a possible solution to the NEA debate of the viability of theatre: grant money to institutions that make commitments to plays and playwrights via production. As that has not happened (and given Landesman's reaction, is not likely to happen), the "do-it-yourself" model became a necessity.

Handel and the other twelve playwrights who became part of the initiative decided to pool their resources, fundraise on their own, and create a best-case scenario for each one of their plays. For Handel, the Basic Equity Showcase contract has "worked well":

So, people aren't getting paid per se, but we had two very successful shows early on in the project. Our first production [Anne Washburn's *The Internationalist*] was picked up the Vineyard. The third production, [Handel's *The Aphrodisiac*, was] picked up by Long Wharf." (Handel Interview)

For Handel, this model – that is, the potential to "move" to a "professional" venue, works as incentive for the actors and designers involved with the showcase productions: "We can't pay

you, but we have had two shows move. This was a good way of marketing our work to people, rather than getting caught up in the workshop and development cycle” (Handel Interview).

Madeleine George attributes their ability to raise a budget (of approximately \$90,000 a season) to Rob Handel:

The key to following through to our promise was Rob’s skill and persistence in fund raising; the fact that he had arts management experience; he was a development officer at Mark Morris Dance Company. He knew how to make a non-profit arts organization solvent. Out of nothing. Mixed with the producing [know-how] of Maria turned out to be a functional recipe. (George Interview)

Economic know-how and persistence have certainly guided 13P; however, there is one more element that 13P has which has given them tremendous visibility – a Pulitzer Prize-winning advocate, Paula Vogel. Vogel won her Pulitzer Prize for *How I Learned to Drive* in 1998, and was instrumental in creating Brown’s theatre program during the nineteen-eighties, and pairing it with the regional theatre company, Trinity Rep. She is now the head of the graduate playwriting program at Yale University. Vogel is one of the most visible playwrights of the late twentieth century (I will look at ways in which her work has been canonized in chapter three).

Handel and fellow 13P member Sarah Ruhl both graduated from Brown with MFAs in Playwriting. At the time, Paula Vogel had made tuition free for accepted playwrights (Howard Meyer interview). Handel says of Vogel:

Paula has a reputation of being the best. She’s so dedicated. And when she picks you, she’s very serious about making sure people know about you. And helping people grow organically. She has such a strong sense of history and literature, and you know, and a lot of people will tell the story about how she’ll hear your play, go home, and she’ll come back with a reading list of like 200 plays and say “I think this is what you’re working toward.” She’s great. (Handel Interview)

During the 13P run of Handel’s *Aphrodisiac*, Vogel “called Gordon [Edelstein], the artistic director at the Long Wharf [a regional theatre in New Haven] and said ‘you have to see this’” (Handel interview). That advocacy led to *Aphrodisiac* being picked up by The Long Wharf the

following season, with the same actors, the same director, and the same artistic team “carried over” (Handel Interview).

Having a nationally recognized playwright/educator advocate for one’s theatre company is certainly one way to grab the public’s attention. But what works are being produced by 13P that may be passed up by other producers? For many not-for-profit theatres operating under League of Resident Theatre (LORT) contracts, cast size has to be streamlined in order to keep the production affordable (as cast members must be paid union wages according to Actors Equity Association guidelines). According to the Actors’ Equity Association’s website:

The League of Resident Theatres (LORT) Agreement is used by not-for-profit professional regional theatres throughout the United States. Some Theatres employ resident companies each season, though most employ performers on a show-by-show basis. Five categories, based on actual weekly box office gross (averaged over a three year period), determine salary and personnel requirements. Local and overnight touring is permitted, but per diem is required when an actor performs overnight tours away from the Theatre. This agreement covers both dramatic and musical productions. (“LORT”)

For example, in a LORT-A theatre, the weekly pay for a union actor (AEA) is \$865, while the weekly contract for a stage manager, who also must be union (AEA) at a regional theatre, is \$1,254. In a small regional theatre, the minimum weekly contract for an actor is \$555, while the weekly minimum for a stage-manager (on a non-repertory basis) is \$683 (*EquityLeague*).

Because of these financial realities, many regional theatres only produce plays that feature between four and six characters, in one set location and, as a means of engaging with the community, realism as the dominant aesthetic. In other words, the definition of “good drama” is now further shaped by the economics of producing a play (cast limit, limited production values, etc.). There is a visible production cost the moment the playwright sets the words to paper. However, 13P’s productions ignore these notions, as the playwrights explore avenues of creating works that communicate something to the world, tried-and-true parameters notwithstanding.

Anne Washburn's *The Internationalist*, for example, the first play to be produced by 13P, relied on a fictitious foreign language. Washburn felt that traditional audiences might be put off at first by the unusual/unrealistic nature of the play, but found that high school students really responded to the visuals, and attempted to make sense out of what they saw:

I feel like in life we enjoy this process of not quite knowing what is going on, and putting our sense of meaning on it – like with the pop songs, or with television series such as *Twin Peaks* and *Lost* – but we come to the theatre and expect things to be spelled out. Like in a pop song, we might not know what's going on, but in the theatre, we want that. What is the sense of intelligence we bring to the theatre? I think that theatre, realism, has become [...] I love a really good realistic play, I'm all for it, but I think that people can, um, I think audiences can become complacent about the rules, and how they're meant to perceive things. So, it's natural. I think that's the whole page to the stage dilemma if someone is writing work that is curious on the page and functions on the stage. (Washburn Interview)

Washburn highlights a key concern when reading playscripts: a piece of writing for the stage (when the writer thinks theatrically) may not work on the page. Therefore, this is another crisis with the process-as-product: if a work is overtly theatrical, it is may be diagnosed (by workshop audience members, literary managers and their readers, etc.) as being problematic, and therefore unworthy of production (i.e., not a “good drama”). However, with a fully realized production, a “curious” work on the page may find a rich and exciting life, and a fresh audience (in this case, high school students, who are being exposed to live performance).

Other “theatrical” plays produced by 13P include Lucy Thurber's *Monstrosity*, which premiered in July, 2009 under the Equity Showcase contract. This play features a cast of forty, which would certainly fall outside of the aesthetic parameters of a cast of four to six actors.

Jeffrey Tallmer of *Chelsea Now* suggests:

The monsters in Lucy Thurber's “Monstrosity” are perfectly nice American fascists — prep school kids and their housemasters, not quite what Sinclair Lewis foresaw in his 1935 “It Can't Happen Here.” Closer to what Calder Willingham

and Ben Gazzara were showing us at the Theater de Lys on Christopher Street in their 1953 “End As a Man.” (Tallmer)

In a promotional video for the piece, Lucy Thurber says:

I am a total fantasy novel geek. I like knights (laughs) and horses and swords. And I really, really, had growing up, had a big thing about being bummed out that none of the main real action heroes were girls. So I wanted to do an epic story, a hero story, with a girl. (*Monstrosity Preview*)

The idea of taking a male-centered story (the myth) and putting a woman in the center is not necessarily new. Director Lear de Besonne points out, however, that Thurber had not intended to write *a* hero quest, but rather, hero quests, as each of the three acts “has a hero”:

We follow twelve characters; twelve characters each of whom are really complicated and amazing, and, whatever, forty other people! (laughs) We now have thirty singing teenagers that we just added for the opening moments of the show. So, it is a world that is huge! (*Monstrosity Preview*)

Citing the Hitler Youth Movement and “prep school” as the jumping off point for the play, Besonne says that the world of story is “not a world that any of us actually have read about or seen before” (*Monstrosity Preview*). In short, Thurber, Besonne, and the rest of the creative team have orchestrated a world that is hyperreal; that is, a simulacrum of a prep school, with shadows of the Nazi movement, while operating freely from the structures of the real world, unlike the aesthetics of American realism. It can be concluded that a regional theatre would not consider reading, nevermind producing such an ambitious piece. 13P, however, explored these challenges by producing the work, as Thurber explains in a preview video for her play

*Monstrosity*:

In order to actually finish the play I’ve been working on for the majority of my adult life [*Monstrosity*], I need to actually see it up on its feet with lights, and sound and music, and direction and a set, and costumes, for me to actually make it work. I thought, “13P, baby, here I come!” (*Monstrosity Preview*)

For Thurber, *Monstrosity* is “a gigantic, enormous, three-act play with thirty people and marching teenagers and singing and twins on a double bicycle,” in which “we’re doing a big extravaganza, ‘found space’ event with it” (*Play Labs*). Twins on a double bicycle, serving as a kind of “prologue” to each act, are hardly on the coded horizons of expectations for an audience, nor are they found within the realm of the workshop-structured “good drama.” However, there is a reason for that. In an interview with Hollins University’s Playwrights Lab (Roanoke Virginia), Thurber mentions that she did not attend graduate school because she could not afford it (*Play Labs*), and thus has not been shaped by the very institutions that create current notions of “good drama.” Thurber’s lack of institutional shaping, I argue, has been key for her success (measured by the fact she is produced) in creating a play that shatters traditional notions of story-telling, and expectations of cast-size and dramatic structure. In other words, because Thurber-as-playwright has not been institutionalized, her play would not be celebrated by Baker or the workshop models of the twentieth century, but for the members of 13P, it serves as the achievement of what playwrights can do, given the resources and the confidence to do it.

Thurber has said of 13P “We believe that the final stage of development for a play is the first production because that’s where you work out all the kinks and we just wanted to create more of an opportunity for ourselves to keep working.” (*Play Lab*). With the “do-it-yourself” model, playwrights are able to work how they would like, when they would like, and in collaboration with directors, artistic team, and staff that they trust. It also involves taking risks, trying new things with the stage (or found performance spaces, another move away from a coded horizon of audience expectations), and in some cases, using performers who have no experience. After all, with the Equity Showcase Contract, there is no cap on how many non-union actors can

be used in a performance. In an article in *The High 5 Review: teen coverage of the NYC arts scene*, blogger Tina Kuo writes:

With no experience in theater, singing, or acting, I went to the Connelly Theater not knowing what to expect when High 5 put out a call for volunteers to be a part of the play — to join the “teen army.” I went and joined. I’m happy I took the risk and ended up having one of the coolest summer experiences I could ask for. Instead of just seeing and reviewing a play, I was in one! (Kuo)

Kuo continues, “It was interesting to be on the other side of the curtain. I saw how producing a play was a never-ending process involving run-throughs and editing that takes weeks of hard work, persistence, and cooperation” (Kuo). Kuo’s remarks are important: script editing took place during the rehearsal process geared toward production. With the workshop model, a play would be edited and revised before audience, artistic directors, potential producers, etc., leaving the writer feeling that the work could never be completed, and would never be the kind of “good drama” that deserves production. However, with the rehearsal process, changes are made with actors on their feet. Moments are discovered, and organically found, rather than worked out on paper in a literary fashion, geared toward reader’s theatre.

I have taken some time to discuss Lucy Thurber’s piece because the aesthetic is unconventional, that is, it does not fit in with the current institutionalized notion of good drama, which is now tied to the economics of production. Nor did Thurber have access to the larger network of regional theatre prior to her involvement with 13P (she is now a resident at New Dramatists). Furthermore, Thurber did *not invite critics* to the production of her play. If someone wanted to see it, they paid.

Thurber’s success (which, in this case, includes the production of *Monstrosity* and her visible acceptance into New Dramatists) indicates that playwrights who do not hold an MFA from an Ivy League institution may still gain recognition from the mainstream theatre if they are

willing to self-produce. Other non-MFA playwrights involved with 13P include Gary Winter, whose *At Said* was a Pinteresque foray into magical realism. I asked Winter about being the artistic director of his play:

It's what made you take responsibility for pretty much everything. And as one of us said, "there is no artistic director giving you notes at the end of the day." That's not a bad thing. I know Rob worked at the Long Wharf, and he said the artistic director made his play a lot better. So, I'm not knocking that at all. It is a huge responsibility [being AD], and it's kind of great that you're responsible for everything up there. At the same time it's scary, and at the same time it's pretty cool being in control of everything. (Winter Interview)

With each playwright, there was a different approach to the Artistic Director hat. In this context, the "Artistic Director" for a single play hires the director and design team, and works collaboratively with them in order to ensure that the themes and/or aesthetics for the particular production are cohesive. Winter's role as Artistic Director was "standard," as he was "involved in the casting, involved with the director" (Winter Interview). When comparing his approach to Lucy Thurber's, Winter says, "What she did was so unique." He continues, "With Lucy, she wanted something up with forty actors. Nobody in the world is doing this! And she said "I'm not inviting reviewers, and I'm doing this insane huge play!" (Winter Interview).

Winter did invite critics to *At Said*. Helen Shaw, writing for *The New York Sun* writes in her review, entitled "Now is the Winter of Our Deep Content":

There is a long history of writers trying for the dreamy effects that Gary Winter (and 13P's sensitive production of "At Said") seem to sink into with ease. And in thumbnail, his plot - a stifled, static life finally finds its windows thrown open - will seem like the shallowest of clichés. But Mr. Winter manages to take some very pedestrian language (the word "ferris wheel" is so exotic that one character just wants to gaze at it on a page) and make it strange and mysterious again. The sensation is like watching Harold Pinter, feeling our most trusted words turn into slippery bars of meaning in our hands. (Shaw)

Shaw continues to compare the work with Beckett, another canonized "absurdist," and suggests, "Mr. Winter seems to have his eye on the kitchen sink- as in hyper realism" (Shaw).



Furthermore, “Language is used to reveal the barriers it creates rather than breaks down; reason uncovers irrationality. And surfaces are presented to reveal their essential unreality” (Shaw).

The reception of *At Said* suggests that the audience can process a work that falls outside of American realism. It also highlights that the way an actor performs a commonplace term, “ferris wheel,” gives a play an added emotional weight, which may not be present when reading or *hearing* the play read at a workshop. Only a full production can create the adequate conditions of reception.

Julia Jarcho, another member of 13P, also discussed her role as Artistic Director. Unlike Winters and other members, she decided to direct her own work, a taboo in the playwriting world. With workshops and productions prior to 13P, directing her own work was something she had to “fight for”: “With 13P, nobody batted an eyelash even though they haven’t done it before. That’s an example of how incredibly gracious and easy to work with everyone was” (Jarcho Interview). While the merits of directing one’s own work or working with a director can be debated, the larger point to be made is that there is no aesthetic unity, no hierarchy, and no indication that there is a way of creating works that is not appropriate, and therefore should not be done. As Jarcho says, “It has never been about forming an aesthetic identity, or a characteristic mode of work; but it has been about producing these 13 pieces” (Jarcho Interview).

What 13P offers is a plurality of approaches, from writers of different backgrounds with vastly different ideas of what theatre is, and what it *can be*, as long as it is *produced*. One of the most prominent playwrights in America is 13P member Sarah Ruhl, whose *The Clean House* was a 2005 Pulitzer Finalist, and whose Broadway debut at The Lincoln Center, *In the Next Room (or the vibrator play)* has dealt with a topic that is taboo, and earned high critical praise.

Writing for *The New York Times*, critic Charles Isherwood offers the following after seeing the Berkeley Rep Production in 2009:

Comical though the play's depiction of Dr. Givings's methods might seem, it is based on historical fact. The use of primitive vibrators to treat women (and some men) suffering from a variety of psychological ailments referred to as hysteria is well documented. But Ms. Ruhl's play is hardly intended as an elaborate dirty joke at the expense of the medical profession. Her real subject is the fundamental absence of sympathy and understanding between women and the men whose rules they had to live by for so long, and the suspicion and fear surrounding female sexuality and even female fertility. (Isherwood)

In short, playwrights involved with 13P's "do-it-yourself" model have made an impact on the current state of American drama. Ruhl's incorporation of yesteryear's avant-garde writing has proven successful with audiences and critics (Handel Interview). As Rob Handel suggests, "People felt comfortable with *The Clean House*, so the metatheatrical world is not scary at all. It's fun" (Handel Interview).

With the arrival of the "do-it-yourself" production model, the American drama has become more "fun," which, given Ruhl's interest in the avant-garde, can be read as "theatrical." If theatricality scores with audiences and critics, then why has the regional theatre failed to recognize the importance of breaking away with aesthetic realism? Can an audience be educated to enjoy alternatives to the mainstream? Or, does the lack of theatrical plays (produced or read) at most regional theatres suggest administrative timidity, that is, a fear of losing box-office revenue by taking aesthetic risks? For Jeremy Cohen, the recently appointed Artistic Director of The Playwrights Center of Minneapolis, it is indeed the administrative fear of taking a financial risk:

We've got to get on regional theatres and push them through their fears of producing new works, because if we don't we're going to let [issues of] money be the dying out of great new theatrical work, and we can't let that happen. (Cohen Interview)

Because art—for better or for worse—operates in a world of commerce and trade, it is understandable why certain plays may be “too hot” for regional theatres in conservative areas. For example, I have a hard time imagining British playwright Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* being produced at the Actors Theatre of Louisville; the title alone may cause the company to lose corporate sponsorship. On the other hand, if Berkeley Rep. Theatre is able to produce a play with the word “vibrator” in its title, then perhaps American audiences are more open to risk than regional administrators believe possible.

The last item that, for Handel, makes 13P successful as a producing model is its “built-in imploding mechanism”; that is, after the thirteenth playwright has a play produced with 13P, the company will disband, thereby keeping the mission of the company on task (Handel Interview). That is, the mission of the company is to make sure each playwright has produced one of his or her own plays, and once that mission is completed, so ends the company. But what of companies that wish to create works and sustain longevity/ do not agree with the implosive mechanism? What of companies that do not have an advocate as visible as Paula Vogel? There is another model which situates the playwright-as-producer and answers these concerns, and that can be found with Sanctuary: Playwrights Theatre. Like 13P, Sanctuary is an Off-Off Broadway company that operates using the Basic Showcase Contract (on a show-to-show basis). Unlike 13P, they do not have a set schedule, and the only area that Sanctuary handles is the funding. The rest is entirely up to the playwright/producer.

#### Sanctuary: Playwrights Theatre

As noted throughout this chapter, the economics involved with earning a production in the regional theatres are daunting. Because of fiscal responsibility to backers (corporate and

community), a number of theatres that operate under a LORT contract are not willing to take a financial risk by presenting work that may be deemed crude or aesthetically alternative to American realism. Furthermore, as the performers, designers, stage-hands, etc. are all union and must be paid, a number of theatres produce plays that feature only four-to-six performers, and have limited set changes. Because this has become the dominant aesthetic in American theatre, plays which fall outside of realism, and which feature more than six characters, are deemed as problematic (as suggested by Douglas Anderson's study "Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development"). However, 13P has offered a model for playwrights to self-produce, which has instilled confidence in the playwright and his or her work, while also experimenting (via production) with different aesthetics, outside of the American standard.

Another model that has come to the fore is offered by Sanctuary: Playwrights Theatre. Like 13P, Sanctuary asks the playwright to wear the hat of the producer/artistic director (hire the director, stage manager; secure the cast with the director, hire designers for the work, promote and market the work, etc.). Unlike 13P, they do not have a set season, nor do they feature an "implosion" mechanism. As Bob Jude Ferrante, managing director of Sanctuary, has mentioned:

Sheila Callahan [13P member] told me about Rob and 13P. We talked about each of us doing companies. Rob and I differed on one aspect: Rob wanted a fixed number of playwrights that would never change, and I wanted more of a growing family approach. (Ferrante Interview)

Ferrante concludes, "What they do is great, but supposedly, they're almost finished. It's very difficult for an organization to consciously plan their own destruction. Most organizations want to preserve themselves [...] So, Sanctuary wants to stick around" (Ferrante Interview).

Sanctuary's model differs from 13P, as mentioned, in several ways: it is looking to grow in number of playwrights, it does not have a set season (13P is more or less set), and it does not have an advocate with Paula Vogel's visibility. However, they operate under similar ideologies,

the most important being that the playwright acts as the producer and artistic director of his or her own work. The lack of season, however, is not a deterrent for Ferrante:

The thing about us is that we don't have a season and we don't have subscribers, which is one of the reasons why we're so broke, but it also gives us the freedom to produce when we feel that a work is ready. We get to choose when we produce. If we don't have anything that we think is ready to go, then we don't do anything. I think it's actually a business model that works. That's the business model that Broadway has. Broadway producers don't just crank out a show every year. They produce when a show is ready. (Ferrante Interview)

If there is a downside to the “do-it-yourself” model, it is that the work being produced might not seem “legitimate, because the motivating individual was the playwright,” not an outside producer or organization:

If you're a novelist, and you publish your own novel, you're called a “vanity press writer,” and everyone will avoid that book because it's a vanity press book. But, if you're a playwright, and you produce your own play, the audience is not aware. Novels have the publisher's name on them. They [might] say “Viking” on the spine. And if you're Joe Smith, and there's “Joe Smith” on the spine, there was no editor involved to tell me if the book is worth my time. Publishers select works for you. (Ferrante Interview)

With self-produced plays, there is no “intermediary” deciding if the work is worthwhile to an audience. During the Self-Production Panel, one audience member (a playwright in his late sixties) noted that prior to the twenty-first century, a playwright's name “could not appear on a bill more than once,” or he or she would be “shredded by the critics.” Panelist Rick Orloff noted that he never “puts his name” as the producer, but rather names his company as the production agency. I followed up with his remark, asking him what would be at risk by putting his name on the program. He responded:

There is a long history of playwrights creating theater companies to produce their own work, from Moliere to Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company, which received great acclaim Off-Off-Broadway for 20 years [...] However, there is a much greater history of theater artists (playwrights, directors and actors) with limited or no talent producing their own work so they can be seen. Probably the majority of Off-Off Broadway shows fall in that category. If a production turns out well, it's considered industrious self-producing; if it's crap, it's considered

vanity. As most people don't know my work yet, I think it's safer to avoid raising suspicions that a production is a vanity project. [...] I just don't want to trigger prejudices before they see the show. (Orloff Email)

Because there may be a “prejudice” against a self-production, the use of a company name masks the self-as-producer to reduce the likelihood that a self-production may not be seen as legitimate. As Ferrante suggests, with any production, the audience “has to become their own critic” and “see a work to decide if it’s worth their time or not” (Ferrante). What I would suggest is that the notion of self-produced play as vanity no longer applies to theatre production. Since the twenty-century notion of “process-as-product” has so narrowed the aesthetic field of what type of play may expect a traditionally “legitimate” production, playwrights working outside that aesthetic must seek new production outlets and make them legitimate.

While the “masking” of the playwright-as-producer may seem disingenuous, in some ways, Sanctuary side-steps that by selecting works they feel are close to being production-ready. The submission process works as follows: a playwright submits a play along with a statement of why the playwright-producer model works for him or her. The playwright is given a budget (of about \$14,000), which they use to rent a desired space, hire actors (Equity Showcase or not), a director, designers, and if they wish, a publicity agent. In short, they are responsible for “making the phone calls,” and all hiring decisions, as long as they stay within their budget.

However, this is not to suggest that it is easy for a playwright to self-produce. On the contrary, some playwrights are introverted, and would rather not be forced to make the required phone calls in order to make sure their work gets seen. In regards to timid playwrights, Ferrante notes:

I actually had to give up a play that has just gotten major critical recognition because the playwright would not act as producer. The playwright was not getting involved in decision making. He would only come in to say the actors were not getting paid enough. That’s the only time he gave a note in a 2 month

period. The core of being a producer is getting a budget, and being told you can't spend anymore. He wanted to spend 2,000 that we don't have. That's not being a producer, that's being a child throwing a tantrum! A producer either has to raise that money, or cut some corners somewhere else. (Ferrante Interview)

In the past six years, Sanctuary has produced two full-length plays and a night of one-act plays in New York City. Their inaugural production was an evening of one-acts in October 2004, entitled *6 Nights*. The evening included new work by Jason Grote, Sheila Callahan, Lisa D'Amour, Sung Ro, Kia Corthon, and Caridad Svich. With this production, the venue changed each evening that it was presented. As stated by the Sanctuary website, "Some of NY's most visionary playwrights experiment with the context-shifts that location inspires" (*Sanctuary*). These locations were "found" by the playwrights, and each night, one play acted as "host" while the others acted as "guests" (the show ran for six performances). This notion of a "found space" echoes the early days of Off-Off Broadway, when artists gathered in coffee houses, storefront windows, and churches.

During the Self-Production Panel hosted by The Dramatists Guild, Elyse Singer noted the importance of using free-space when self-producing: "Most of your budget will go to renting space." The panel agreed – if one is producing in New York City, the most important financial decisions one makes include *not* spending money. If space is available for free, use the space. A production is a production (I will consider the implications of this statement in chapter seven).

Although the Sanctuary model has not produced the volume of work that 13P has, it is nevertheless one that Ferrante intends to be "local": that is, it is Ferrante's hope that organizations around the country will look at the Sanctuary model and emulate it, as a means of keeping theatre vital and plural. Ferrante suggests that other companies "can even use the name 'Sanctuary'" (Ferrante Interview). This notion of theatre-as-local-event has been echoed by scholars, such as Bradley Boney, who suggests:

[...] the efficacy of theatre-in any time and in any place-has always hinged on immediate community. Live performance is a local phenomenon. It cannot be reproduced and distributed to the four corners of the globe. It cannot end up in the video store or a paperback edition. People continually and annoyingly judge art by its global impact, its ability to reach as many people as possible, and artists have become caught up in this. (103)

Being a local phenomenon, theatre is not, as Boney suggests, part of the “national” or “pop-culture” dialogue in America. Those conversations are grounded in media and “cultural spin,” which ultimately feeds into larger conversations vis-à-vis the market industry (capitalism). Furthermore, “theatre is, and will probably forever remain, a cottage industry, a handmade craft” (99). The use of the term “handmade” suggests that the ability to create a live performance is much more “doable” than creating representations via other media (television, cinema, and web). Because theatre is a local art, it is an accessible one, one the playwright has the ability to shape via self-production.

In conclusion to this look at the playwright-as-producer model, I would like to note that the idea of a playwright producing his or her own work, or being involved in an area of theatre outside of the immediate “putting words to paper” is not necessarily new: Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Belasco have all served as producers of their own plays. As Roland Tec suggested at the Self-Production Panel, the moment a playwright “talks to an actor” about his or her script, or the moment the playwright connects with a director vis-à-vis his or her work in progress, the playwright has already become a self-producer. The self-producer is first and foremost an advocate for the work, which is the essential step toward forging relationships with directors, actors, press agents, and the rest of the theatre industry.



## CONCLUSIONS FOR ART V. COMMERCE

While the NEA has provided funding to arts organizations since 1965, the current theatre climate has returned to a “do-it-yourself” mentality, avoiding the bureaucracy of government (and corporate) grant institutions, literary managers, dramaturges, and the never-ending series of workshops that have ground American drama (and theatricality) to a halt in the name of legacy (O’Neill, Actors Studio) aesthetic decency (NEA), institutional acceptance (Ivy League, including New Dramatists,), and the rhetoric of capitalism (“supply and demand”). That is, playwrights are building their “own fucking theatre,” using models foregrounded by 13P and Sanctuary Playwrights Theatre; and those who practice theatre and performance are welcome to join them. However, the transition is not an easy one. At the Self-Production Panel, a number of playwrights I spoke with afterward were surprised that they were being told to produce their own work. One playwright suggested that he came to listen to the panel because he is interested in meeting other playwrights, but the role of producer was not one he was fully willing to commit to, as there are already “producers in the world.”

Another playwright started pleading with Rich Orloff, who is frequently produced. She wanted to know his key to success – how can one get a regional production? Tech steered the conversation back to self-production, but the playwright insisted, practically pleading, as if a last-ditch attempt at getting her play produced lay in writing the perfect subject line in an emailed query. On one hand, what these anecdotes suggest is a generation gap (I was easily the youngest one in the room), and, perhaps having graduated from an MFA program where actors, writers, and directors work together, I have taken the self-production model for granted as *the* way to build the American theatre. On the other, it also suggests that the confidence playwrights have in terms of getting their work into the world has dwindled via the developmental

workshops, larger media, and the notion that they should be happy enough just to have readings at LORT and Small Professional Theatres (SPT). However, playwrights *fully* learn their craft through the production experience (even with the benefits of playwriting workshops geared toward the writer, as highlighted in chapter four), and for the twenty-first-century playwright, that means acting as an advocate for his or her own work by every means possible. In the next chapter, I am going to look at a third model for self-production: the creation of an SPT, which relies on not only professional (i.e., “union”) actors and visible directors, but also on building a community in a bedroom town north of New York City.

## CHAPTER SIX

### AXIAL THEATRE: BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL AND COMMUNITY

In the wider sense, a theatre can only exist when a sufficient portion of the local community is willing to allow its existence.

– Stephan Langley, *Theatre Management in America* (275-276)

In chapter three, I suggested that the regional theatre has been becoming more insular. Because many productions at regional theatres are either looking to move to Broadway, or at the very least, to be produced at more regional theatres, the immediate community that supports the theatre is being taken for granted. While developmental readings may certainly include a talk-back session with audiences, these talk-backs, in general, serve the needs of grants rather than the immediate community. A case-in-point is the talk-back highlighted in chapter three, in which Julie Dubiner failed to direct the conversation to highlight the working mechanisms of the reading of *The Cherry Sisters Revisited* in a way that could educate the audience as to how the reading could serve the writer, and furthermore, how the reading could serve the audience. With the reading at LSU, it would have been wonderful to have a pedagogical component to the discussion, as many students in the room may find themselves working on new plays, or with organizations that have second-stage readings; however, that opportunity was missed.

In a way, the educational component is one of the most important tools at a theatre company's disposal in order to gain access into, and become part of, a community. Some early regional theatres failed to consider this. For example, when discussing the role of community building in *The Humana Festival: The History of New Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville*, Jeffrey Ullom highlights how The Actors Workshop, a San Francisco regional theatre founded in 1952, insulted and abandoned its audience. Founders Jules Irving and Herbert Blau produced

both classical texts and newer works. Indeed, according to a panel with the Mamou Mimes at the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) conference in November, 2010, Blau suggests that he was introducing San Francisco to the work of absurdist authors, such as Samuel Beckett, but audiences responded poorly to the works, apparently alienated by them. As Ullom points out, Blau and Irving “failed to educate the community about the value of their artistic accomplishments,” while Blau “wrote scathing newspaper articles that ridiculed their audiences and implied an antiestablishment holier-than-thou attitude, thus disenfranchising many traditional patrons” (8).

If regional theatres are failing to acknowledge the community through audience participation, are there other ways they are failing as well? Is it possible to build a theatre that not only creates a dialogue with the community, but incorporates local, community artists in their company? Can a standard be created that allows for community theatre, often disregarded by the theatre-at-large, and which furthermore allows the community to strive for a place in the professional theatre world? Can new play development and production bind a community of artists together with the larger community it serves?

In this chapter, I am going to consider a theatre company that can serve as a model of new play development and production, which operates in the gray area between the constructed professional theatre (i.e., LORT), and the community theatre, which I call a community-*oriented*-theatre company. I argue that this “do-it-yourself” company, Axial Theatre led by playwright and director Howard Meyer, is able to fulfill the promises made by the early regional theatres to the community, while also restoring value to the playwright function. By operating locally and avoiding the insular pitfalls of the regional theatre, new plays and new play development can meet the needs of individual artists and the immediate, local community.

## COMMUNITY AND COMMUNITY-ORIENTED-THEATRE

Surprisingly little scholarship exists that addresses community theatre. Looking at websites such as Amazon.com and the libraries of SUNY New Paltz and Louisiana State University, one finds a plethora of “how to build your own community theatre” books, but precious little that indicates what community theatre is, or how it operates.

In her book, *Staging America*, Sonja Kuftinec highlights the practices of the Cornerstone theatre company, a community-based-performance group. In her introduction, she locates the key differences between a community-based-theatre company, and community theatre. As Kuftinec argues:

Prior to the addition of a hyphenated base, borrowed from public funding language and popularized in the 1980s, theater scholars and professional practitioners tended to refer to community theater and its antecedents in pejorative terms, conjuring scenes of Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland rummaging through Granny’s trunk in the barn, puttin’ on a show. (23)

Furthermore, when looking at a subscriber’s comment dismissing a production, Kuftinec adds “The subscriber’s comment, with its implicit focus on the difference between good (regional, professional) and bad (community, amateur) art, exemplifies a prevailing critical distinction” (23). The notion becomes clear: community theatre smacks of amateurism (pejorative), and, as John Anderson suggests, “instead of doing anything at all constructive, it becomes a frank imitator of Broadway theater” (qtd. Kuftinec 33).

Community-based-theatre grows out of a need for members of under-represented groups to create works that both create their own sense of community and reach out to the *larger* community via performances that situate audience members as spect/actors, rather than spectators. The role of many community-based organizations is political, as, for the most part,

community-based-theatre pushes activist agendas by moving away from narrative drama and traditional spaces for performance in order to unmask social injustice.<sup>3</sup> Community theatre, on the other hand, has its own set of practices, its own history, and its own notions of community.

I have taken a moment to discuss community-based-theatre in order to better ground the distinction from community theatre. What, then, is community theatre and how does it, or how can it, define a community? In *Theatre Management in America*, Stephen Langley suggests that community theatres are “nonprofessional groups that present plays with some regularity” (14). Furthermore, Langley suggests:

When non-professional theatre operates under the guidance of a dedicated and knowledgeable leader, whether he is himself a professional nor not, when work is carried on with an honest realization of the limitations at hand, when the group is dedicated to theatre for its own sake and not merely trying to ape the commercial stage, the results should be satisfactory. (14)

What Langley is implying is that community theatre needs to justify itself, in order to move away from the notion that the community stage exists to echo the commercial (i.e., Broadway) stage. All-in-all, Langley’s book is a practical guide to creating a theatre company (he includes professional, stock, amateur, college, etc.), asking those who wish to manage a theatre group to consider the goals and limitations of creating, operating, and maintaining a viable company. However, the book is drastically out-of-date (published in 1974), so the context for creating a theatre has changed.

Community theatre remains the elephant in the room of theatre discourse. In his paper recently given at the Mid-American Theatre Conference, “Without a Base: The Troubled Status of Community Theater within the Academy,” David Coley problematizes the role of community theatre, while pushing against the (constructed) dismissal of amateur performers:

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<sup>3</sup> For further reading on the practices of community-based-theatre, see John Fletcher’s “Identity and Agonism: Tim Miller, Cornerstone, and the Politics of Community-Based Theatre.” *Theatre Topics* 13.2 (2003): 189-203.

When people try to define what exactly constitutes a “community theater,” one of the most common words used is “amateur.” [...] What, however, is the end product? Is a theater production’s amateur status indicative of its level of quality? Is it just a dim shadow of the work being done by professional companies? How does it stack up against regional theatre productions? Or university productions? High school productions? In a hierarchy of performance practices, where does community theater fall? Do we afford it the same level of attention, concern, and study as we do other “types” of theater? I don’t think any of us would say that people should be excluded from theater. It is an open art form accessible to viewing and participation in by all. Anyone can do theater. But how do we react when they actually do? (1)

The last question is essential: what happens when someone not deemed worthy by the larger theatrical practice (i.e., “an amateur”), actually produces theatre him- or herself? This suggests one of the bigger problems with community theatre – not that the play production is inherently problematic, but that the outside pressures of the professional world tend to designate community theatre as amateur, in a derogatory sense of the word.

How, then, can new play development and production function in a community setting, and be a part of the community, and yet maintain ties to the larger, professional world? Why is the “do-it-yourself” mechanism the best approach to achieve these goals? While I do not feel it is necessary to have acceptance by the larger theatre profession, there are companies that rely on their acceptance in order to prove to themselves (and the community) that the art they do matters. There is cultural caché to be earned by being accepted by the insular LORT theatre networks for both the theatre company and the community that it serves. In short, I am arguing for a *community-oriented-theatre*.

A community-oriented-theatre can be defined as a theatre that is actively engaged with the community-at-large, features (amateur) community artists, but which also may have an eye toward the mainstream in order to bring cultural caché to a given community. A community-oriented-theatre company can serve a community by providing amateurs (in the “lovers of” sense

of the word) the opportunity to work side-by-side with professionals. In other words, a community-oriented-theatre operates as the synthesis within the dialectic of the community and professional theatres. An example of a community-oriented-theatre is Axial Theatre in Pleasantville, New York. Because Axial Theatre is the product of the two worlds (community and professional), it is vital to understand the horizon of expectations that come with creating a company that promises to serve the community, especially since Axial, unlike many theatres that have a similar foothold, focuses on the development and production of world premieres (a point to which I shall return).

Axial Theatre is not the first arts company to establish itself in Pleasantville, which is a bedroom community for many people who work in New York City. It has its own stop on the Metro North commuter train line in the center of town. A commute to or from New York City is roughly forty minutes. In recent years, however, it has had a thriving arts scene, thanks in part to the Jacob Burns Film Center. According to its website, the Jacob Burns Film Center is a “nonprofit educational and cultural institution dedicated to presenting the best of independent, documentary, and world cinema; promoting 21st century literacy; and making film a vibrant part of the community” (*Jacob Burns Film Center*). Founded in 1998, the film center has earned both a local and national reputation for promoting performing arts and art education. With interest in the arts on the rise in this bedroom town, the conditions were in place for the creation of a theatre company, one that would bring together elements of the professional world (due to its proximity to New York City), while maintaining core community values (i.e., employing community artists, offering educational opportunities via workshops and classes, etc.).

Axial Theatre emulates the Film Center model. The concept of “community values” is a through-line in the operation of the Jacob Burns Film Center, and I argue that the same can be



said of Axial Theatre. Axial's dedication to the development and production of new work *speaks* to the notion of community values. While the aesthetics of the drama offered by Axial are more-or-less grounded in "good drama," I do feel that the model is essential if the do-it-yourself-playwright has the desire to serve the immediate community by establishing a professional theatre which obviates the given structure of the regional theatre. That is not to say that there are not inherent problems with the professional contract, but that the additional pressures (such as participating in the National New Play Network, using Equity Actors over community performers, etc.) are eased via the Small Professional Theatre contract (SPT).

#### SMALL PROFESSIONAL THEATRE CONTRACT

As highlighted throughout this study, there is a notion that the regional theatre, Off-Broadway, and Broadway are *the* professional theatre in the United States, having largely to do with visibility (the use of name-actors, productions of name-playwrights, etc.), but it also having to do with contracts: that is, regional theatres operate under the League of Resident Theatre (LORT) contracts, which dictate the terms vis-à-vis the pay for the union (i.e., "professional") actors and stage manager. Because the staff at the theatre, the actors, the stage-hands, the front-of-house, etc., are all paid, regional theatres need to consider finances prior to production. Therefore, smaller-cast shows have become the norm for most regional theatres.

Furthermore, a number of resident actor-companies at various regional theatres have been disbanded (at the time of writing this, the resident acting companies at the Arena Stage and A.R.T. at Harvard have been disbanded). At a number of regional theatres, "stars" have been brought in for lead roles in order to gain audience attendance (Arena Stage brought in Phylicia Rashād to play Aunt Eller in *Oklahoma!*). As highlighted in chapter four, resident theatres first

emerged as a way of pushing against the dominance of Broadway as the only legitimate theatre in the country. During the early Arena and Alley days, local actors were cast to play the lead roles. Although there were questions about the habits and “reliability” of non-professional actors, nevertheless the resident/regional theatres served the immediate communities by providing works that catered to community tastes while using local talent (Ullom 9-10).

At the same time, what began to emerge were the regional/university models, in which a regional theatre teamed with a university in order to provide pre-professional and professional training (MFAs), which also gave local actors visibility and professional experience; however, by using “star-power” to draw in an audience, regional theatres have, by-and-large, abandoned the notion of serving a community preferring to maintain visibility and meet economic demands. In a larger sense, the use of stars suggests that the regional theatre is in competition with Broadway. Star-power may bring audiences to the theatre, but what then? The regional model suggests that audiences have little else to do but part with their money: the community has money, and the theatre needs their money to stay alive.

As I have indicated throughout this work, a “professional” status is not necessarily the goal of the playwright; however, there is cultural caché in being accepted by the mainstream and joy in having people who have “made it” pay attention to one’s work. Therefore, if a company (and the playwright/producer) wishes to avoid the economic needs of running a LORT-contract space but still wishes to gain professional status (which, again, can be cultural caché for the community) what are the alternatives? Furthermore, how can professional status serve the needs of the theatre and the community? And finally, how can the professional status serve the needs of the playwright function? The answer lies in the Small Professional Theatre Contract.

According to the Small Professional Theatre (SPT) Rulebook provided by the Actor’s

Equity Association website, “The term ‘Small Professional Theatre’ indicates ‘Theatres with a seating capacity of 349 seats or less located outside the cities of Chicago, New York, and the County of Los Angeles’” (5). The rulebook also contains procedures for auditions, scheduling rehearsals, and performances (5). The actors are under consecutive employment, rather than offered a stipend via the Showcase:

Continuous employment of the Actor is the essence of all employment contracts. Employment thereunder shall begin on the date of the beginning of rehearsals or required date of arrival if earlier, and shall continue until terminated as herein provided, and not otherwise. All calculations of sums due or benefits accruing to the Actor shall be computed on the basis of consecutive employment. (13)

Because the actor or stage manager is under a continuous employment contract, shows, unlike the Showcase contract, do not need to run at just sixteen performances. Furthermore, the actors are paid from the moment they are called to rehearsals, until the end of the production. While the SPT features numerous other guidelines, these are the key points of difference I would like to focus on when discussing the role of Axial Theatre in comparison to other theatres that operate under non-LORT contracts.

Shadowland Theatre in Ellenville, New York, operates under the Small Professional Theatre contract (SPT). Shadowland is located in a conservative community. Ellenville is quite rural, situated in the famous Catskill Mountain region, popular with theatre-friendly New York City vacationers. Shadowland, under the Artistic Direction of Brendan Burke, produces plays that already have some exposure. They have co-produced two works with the National New Play Network’s Rolling World Premiere, although they have not been invited to join the NNPN. Productions include Steven Dietz’s *The Yankee Tavern*, as well as Jeffrey Sweet’s *Bluff*,

featuring John Astin.<sup>4</sup> The focus of Shadowland is on non-musical, small cast (four to eight actors) plays of American realism. While they do provide “second-stage” readings of new work (such as Jack Wade’s *Red Masquerade* in 2009), they do not produce world premieres. The community has rallied around the Shadowland due to Burke’s commitment to bringing live performance to Ellenville, and the Shadowland has just received a private grant to winterize its resident building (a renovated art-deco movie house) in order to offer productions year-round.

What Small Professional Theatres have learned from the past is that in order to function, they need both the financial and artistic support from the community base. In order to achieve that, they use actors who are local (often in supporting roles) working alongside professional actors. As Howard Meyer puts it when discussing the most recent Axial Theatre production, “We have a Drama Desk Award-winner [director Joshua Hecht] to lend cultural caché [...] People like working with us for that reason. We provide and share a good, wholesome theatrical experience that is outside the *ouvre* of commercial, and NYC not-for-profit theatre pressures” (Meyer Interview). This is a key point for Shadowland as well: the theatre has to support the community in order to be supported *by* the community. Like the lasting regional theatres, SPTs often have an educational component in an effort to make their artistic achievements a source of celebration and community growth.

Shadowland Theatre provides a model in which the SPT is used to produce established works (or at least works by visible playwrights) using local and professional talent. Axial Theatre, under the artistic leadership of founder Howard Meyer, provides a different model.

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<sup>4</sup> Because Shadowland has worked with the NNPN, and has brought in “star-power,” Shadowland is trying to assert itself as being a regional theatre – LORT contract or not. That is, Shadowland asserts a kind of confidence by operating along similar ideological lines as the LORT contract theatres. While this is perhaps not the most constructive use of the SPT contract, it nevertheless creates the question as to why LORT theatres are necessary to the American theatre if the SPT can create the same opportunities for professional actors and mainstream/visible playwrights? This is a larger question that can lead to further evaluation of the role of the regional theatre.

Unlike Shadowland, which operates in a renovated Art-Deco cinema, Axial does not have its own space. Rather, it rents a large (gothic-revival) community room at the St. John's Episcopal Church. Also, and more important to this study, Axial only produces world premieres.

How does the production of "world premieres" help with community relations, and the notions of a community-oriented-theatre? How does Axial situate itself in the larger apparatus of American production? How do the practices of Axial Theatre benefit the playwright? In the next section, I am going to give a basic history of Axial Theatre, with an eye toward these questions. I will also highlight its working methodologies with the Axial Playreading Series. I will end with a discussion of the production of Howard Meyer's play *Welcome: This is a Neighborhood Watch Community*, looking at both the community and the professional status/visibility of the company.

## AXIAL THEATRE

On August 25, 2010, I joined Howard Meyer at the St. John Episcopal Church in Pleasantville, New York, in order to discuss the genesis of Axial as well as its preference for world premiere plays. Meyer is an energetic, excited man who talks with his hands. It is clear that discussing theatre in general, and Axial specifically, are two of his key passions. Prior to forming Axial, Meyer worked for ten years in the professional theatre world: he was one of the members of the "inaugural Lincoln Center's Workshop," and has directed Off-Broadway (the world premiere of Athol Fugard's "original text" *Hello and Goodbye*, produced by Kevin Spacey at the Rattlestick and the New York Theatre Workshop), and he served as the (workshop) director of Craig Lucas' *The Pavilion* with the Playwrights Center of Minneapolis (*Axial*).

As a playwright, his work has been developed with Naked Angels (a weekly play reading series in New York City, founded by Marissa Tomei and Matthew Broderick), and The

Barrow Street Theatre (Off-Broadway). Also, his plays have been produced with Axial Theatre. His latest venture was *Welcome: This is a Neighborhood Watch Community*, directed by Drama Desk Award-Winner Joshua Hecht, and featuring David Deblinger, co-founder of The LABrynth Theatre Company, and Jon Lindstrom, an Emmy-Award-nominated actor (*Axial*). In short, Meyer already has some visibility in the larger theatre world.

Having listed off Meyer's credits, I realize I am suggesting that a playwright needs to have "authorized" or "legit" credits in order to justify a desire to create a theatre. I only wish to highlight Meyer's credits because not highlighting them would be just as disingenuous. In a way, Meyer's work in the "professional" world has given him insight into the mechanisms of mainstream American production which he wants to both move away from (due to financial pressures and insular practices), and, at the same time, be acknowledged by while serving the needs of the larger community. It is an incredible tight-rope act, which I will attempt to foreground as I perform my analysis.

Axial Theatre began as an acting workshop for high-school students. Meyer was invited to create the class at Barnspace Productions by artistic director and choreographer Iris Salomon. The Barnspace was just that: a renovated barn, used by Solomon to create dance pieces and teach dance classes. Meyer's class created a devised work that was performed for the public. As explained in the short documentary, *Axial: The First Seven Years*: "Mr. Meyer was commissioned to create a play with his teenage acting students, a six month process of improvisational exploration resulted in a story that electrified audiences and led to a feature article in the New York Times" ("The First Seven Years"). As Meyer explains it:

She [Solomon] came to see a project I did with a group of teens, and invited me to bring my class to her space. A year later, her company disbanded, and she had grant money left-over. She asked if I could do something. I met with my teenage

students, and I said, ‘we have this opportunity. But if we do this, it will require six months every weekend.’ The kids said, ‘yes.’ What emerged was a devised piece of theatre, based on studies in identity. They were super into Jeff Buckley. [Buckley drowned in the Mississippi while recording the follow up to his hit 1994 album, *Grace*]. They were playing that a lot. Suddenly, there was an article on a kid who drowned in NYC during a pre-prom party. So, the [first devised] piece, *Swine*, is about a character who drowned – was it a suicide? Wasn’t it a suicide? So, we present this thing, and we present it again, and then the *New York Times* writes it up! (Meyer Interview)

Based on this success, Solomon asked Meyer to continue working with aspiring actors, directors, and writers at the Barnspace, and so Axial was formed. Meyer and his students (many of whom are still Axial members) would continue to create works for the theatre.

The idea of running a theatre worked for Meyer, who believes he was “designed to be a company guy” (Meyer Interview). Meyer had been “fed up with three or four weeks of rehearsal, and starting over,” and wanted an “experience” in which “the work cycles back into the company: the relationships, the ways of working together” (Meyer Interview). With this approach, relationships between the actors, writers, and directors would become more established, giving the work a greater sense of depth. Furthermore, Axial’s approach builds a commonality within the company, thereby creating one community (the group itself); this community then develops and produces its material in dialogue with the larger community, with the promise of a “professional” production, giving the sense that the community does not need to travel to New York City to see legitimate theatre: it is right in their backyard, and stars some of their very own.

Matt Hoverman, a playwright who has gained commercial success in recent years, was an early member of Axial Theatre’s Playwrights Workshop. As he states, The Axial is:

[...] close enough to New York [City] that they have New York [City] actors. And some of the people who are part of the community are New York [City] actors who moved up there. And other people [involved with The Axial as actors and writers] are people from the town. It’s not a full professional theatre [i.e.,

regional], and it's not a community theatre. It's kind of at the juncture.  
(Hoverman Interview)

Here, Hoverman cites the key difference between Axial, and the New York Independent Theatre and regional theatre: it oscillates between professional and amateur, thereby, in a sense, becoming neither. What Axial becomes instead is community-oriented, the kind of theatre that perhaps regional theatre *should have been* during the early days of Margo Jones; that is, a theatre for a region, by a region, but created with those working in the professional theatre in order to understand the function and the limits of the professional theatre. Because the economic pressures are unlike those of the regional theatre (which now relies on star-power for ticket sales), Axial has freedom to develop and *produce* new work, an advantage for the playwright. The freedom of development with production is also a step away from the “developmental hell” of the regional theatre, which develops works without leading to a production (see “Regional Theatre and Developmental Hell” in chapter three). Furthermore, by the core-company being comprised of community members, Axial cements itself as *the* theatre for the Pleasantville area. As Hoverman explains, “You go into a town, and you don’t necessarily have a lot of interaction with a lot of people when you’re a professional actor. But here, it felt like you were with the whole community, and that the community was part of the play” (Hoverman Interview). What Hoverman states is the *ideal* for any theatre operating in a community: that is, the community attends a new play because the community feels *included* in the production. The inclusive practices of Axial stand in direct contrast to Blau and Irving’s earliest ventures, which scolded the community for not understanding their work. Rather, the community *trusts* that Axial will produce excellent work because Axial *trusts* the community by having a resident company comprised of local actors, directors, and playwrights. While there are occasions when a “star” director (such as Joshua Hecht) is brought in, it is never at the exclusion of the community.



Rather, the outsider (such as Hoverman) is introduced to the community, and becomes, for the duration of his or her visit, a part of the community. I argue a function of the community-oriented-theatre is to feature inclusive practices, not just in terms of a dialogic relation with the community-at-large, but also in terms of bringing professional outsiders “inside” community boundaries. Axial Theatre situates itself as a home-base for working professionals, while maintaining healthy community relations, via inclusive practices.

There is another layer to the Axial story and its mutual trust with the community, which has to do with its gaining a permanent (rental) space at St. John’s Episcopal Church. Because Axial had been focusing on new work (devised and written), it was gaining buzz in the community; however, Axial did not have a home-space, which created difficulty insofar as audiences needed to actively seek out the next Axial production.

In 2007, Axial premiered *Two Hearts* by literary manager Linda Guiliano. *Two Hearts*, which consists of two one-act plays, was produced at a found space: a third-story walk-up, reminiscent of the found spaces in the early days of Off-Off Broadway, which was essentially an apartment, not zoned for paid performances. Although Meyer had attempted to side-step any questions of legality via a suggestion for donations rather than a fixed ticket price, he ran into a problem when Bob Heisler from *The Journal News* gave the production a rave review, with a large photo on the cover of the weekend insert (Heisler D1). As a result, audiences overfilled the space, and The Axial was given the order to cease-and-desist performances. At a town board meeting, St. John’s Episcopal Church agreed to rent their community hall to Axial for the rest of the run. Although the first production at St. John’s was a “hard-hitting” family drama, with “a lot of language, violence” and “a rape on stage,” the congregation and committee at St. John’s did not turn them out (Meyer Interview). As Meyer says:

The warden of the church comes to the production, and I say to my collaborator, “if we get away with this, we can do anything.” Not that we’d do a nude review! [Laughs]. We would want to stay true to our mission statement: *Provocative. Relevant. Original.* So, they come. The warden said, “I’m an ex-Marine. None of this bothers me. I’m not afraid of language.” (Meyer Interview).

After the production, the warden congratulated Meyer and the cast. The play was a community success. Axial Theatre, which had been itinerant, now had a home. A mutual trust was gained between Axial and the community; that is, Axial Theatre presented a play with strong themes, adult language, violence, and an on-stage rape, but the community saw that the work had value, and embraced what Axial had created.

I have taken a moment to discuss the role of the community-oriented-theatre, and how it can operate *with* a community by producing works featuring community actors, and avoiding the trappings of bringing in a “star,” or scolding the audience from an intellectually elitist position. The Axial has built a community of artists who are part of the larger community. Furthermore, by having a professional status via the SPT contract, Axial makes two promises to the audience: first, that the productions will be as “legitimate” as anything they could attend in New York City; and second, that the community will attain the cultural caché of being recognized by the larger mainstream apparatus via reviews in *The New York Times* (a point to which I shall). With this in mind, I want to foreground what the works being produced by the Axial are actually like: that is, what is the aesthetic of the play, what is the performance space like, and furthermore, how does the development and production of the new play work to maintain community trust?

### The Play Reading Series

One of the key components of Axial Theatre is the Playreading Series, which meets twice a month at the upstairs library at St. John’s. It is a rather cold room, with a ceiling reminiscent of

a small, gothic arch. There is a piano, a couch, folding chairs, and dusty bookcases with yellowed books. The environment is relaxed, with a sense of the secret, and the sacred (the Work?).

Like the Actors Studio and the New York Writers' Bloc, Axial asks playwrights to bring in their scripts a section at a time; however, there is no set page limit. Sometimes, a playwright will work with a director, and perform rewrites prior to the meeting. Everyone in the room is allowed to weigh in after the piece is read, and Meyer reserves the right to comment last. The night will last for two hours, and the number of pieces read depends on the number of writers who have written for the evening, and whether they are working on a ten-minute piece, a one-act, or a full-length (unlike the Actors Studio, in which playwrights bring in ten pages at a time). At the end of the night, Meyer "passed the hat" for donations, in order to offset the cost of the rental of the room for the evening. Unlike the Actors Studio and the Bloc, Axial is looking to produce new material. Hoverman explains Axial's workshop process:

[...] they have three or four longer pieces that they read, and the actors get it ahead of time. They read it and get feedback, and that's how they're shopping for material to produce. So, they read a few of my plays there and that's how they decided what they were going to do. (Hoverman Interview)

Another key point that Hoverman brings up is that actors are given the scripts ahead of time. Therefore, also unlike the Bloc or the Actors Studio, actors have time to make choices when approaching the work in front of the company. While this is a move away from the kind of "cold reading" of previous workshop models, what is most important about the above quote is the notion that plays are in development *for* production with Axial Theatre. Any play that is brought into the mix is immediately considered. As suggested by Howard Meyer:

All of our original plays come out of extensive collaborative dramaturgical processes between guest and company writers and the entire company. This work takes place in our bi-monthly developmental reading series, Axial Playwrights.

We are committed to presenting the plays in readings, workshop and finished presentations, so as to incorporate audience feedback towards the completion of each play. (*Axial Theatre*)

Although the role of the audience in the creation of work is suspect (see chapter two, “The Role of the Audience”), nevertheless the gearing of a play toward production suggests more of a commitment to the work, and to the playwright function, than the readings offered by regional and other not-for-profit theatres. Furthermore, while regional theatre plays a kind of lip-service to the community by holding talk-back sessions, Axial consists of members *from* the community, along with actors from New York City. What this suggests is a realization of the regional model, but with an actual production on the horizon. Furthermore, because actors have a voice in the creation of a role (from development to production), the playwright is pushed toward, as Michael Wright calls it, “thinking theatrically” (see chapter four). As Axial co-founder, Brett Primack suggests, playwriting does not have to be a “solitary” activity: “Instead of creating in a vacuum, I get instant feedback and my work gets produced regularly [...] Being a part of this group is like being a member of a very loving, supportive family. It's the perfect environment in which to create” (qtd. *The New York Times*). As stated in chapter four, it is essential for the twenty-first-century playwright to establish relationships with actors and directors. Axial’s methodology embraces this collaboration. However, the actor is not the writer. Ultimately, the writer tells the story, but lets the actor in on his or her process.

Since gaining a permanent space in 2007, Meyer has found more flexibility with creating seasons for Axial. As he suggests, they are planned but less “orchestrated” than other not-for-profit companies’. That is, with a focus on new work, Meyer prefers flexibility in the schedule in order to keep the pressure off the playwright and in turn the company (rather than say, putting pressure *on* the playwright to create a script in order to take the pressure *off* a company; this is a

formula for failure, which can cause incredible anxiety for the producers, as well as the actors, designers, etc., involved with the play)<sup>5</sup>:

We have a lot of playwrights we like. We ask a writer to engage in a development process with us. To be here on alternate Sundays where they're developing a new play, or working on an existing manuscript. We do readings of sections, and they get feedback, and go back [to rewriting]. So, it's very loose. The ones that are ready to go are the ones we pursue [for production]. (Meyer Interview)

The key point for Meyer is, "It would be impossible to present quality if we marry ourselves to a work that is not finished or close-to finished" (Meyer Interview). While Meyer does not believe in "writing by committee," a practice that is common in most developmental programs, the notion of not producing a work that is not "finished" warrants further evaluation: to whose satisfaction is a work finished? The playwright's? The company's? How is this different than writing by committee?

Meyer feels the strength in the developmental program is getting a work production-ready. In Meyer's words, "There's no contract, but a willingness to develop. If it works, it works. If not, at least they have a play" (Meyer Interview). The notion of whether or not the relationship, or the aesthetic of the play, "works," is problematic in that it suggests that there is a "kind of play" Axial will produce, which deepen the previous concern vis-à-vis who deems a work ready: the playwright, the other members of the company, or is the decision entirely Meyer's? Meyer, however, does not agree that the Axial approach is committee-based, as every writer approaches the craft in his or her own way: "Every writer has a different approach. Some writers don't have a draft. They need a year or two. Some writers write scene by scene, and need

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<sup>5</sup> In 2006, Tony Kushner was commissioned by The Guthrie Theatre to write a new play, which planned to produce the world premiere in conjunction with a season dedicated to his previous works. Kushner did not have the script ready for the opening performance: a number of lighting cues were being designed even before the scenes were written, causing undue stress for the actors, and a delayed opening. See David Savran's "Kushner's Children of the Revolution" in the October 2009 *American Theatre* for the full account. (Savran 43-45; 142-143).

to hear each scene” (Meyer Interview). However, this does not quite answer the larger concern, one that could suggest Meyer is (consciously or unconsciously) participating with developmental hell. However, given Axial’s track-record with producing a variety of playwrights who have participated with the Playreading Series, some of those concerns may be alleviated, though certainly not dismissed.

Although the process seems democratic, and the evening is haunted by the dueling ghosts of previous workshops (and the pass-the-hat of the Caffè Cino), the aesthetic preference of the group, lead by Meyer, is American realism. During my visit with the Playreading Series, Meyer insisted that each piece find “the pass-over question”; that is, what crisis a character is facing, and what he or she must do to overcome the obstacle. For Meyer, this constitutes “good drama.” Any piece that does not survive the “good drama” test is workshopped until deemed ready. As a result, Axial will be holding a workshop production of Giuliano’s newest play, as it is “not ready” for full production. As in other workshop settings, the development process has in this instance supplanted the role of the rehearsal, depriving Giuliano of the opportunity to learn her craft through production. In short, because Axial’s dominant aesthetic is still, more-or-less, grounded in a dramatic structure of inciting incident, complication, climax, and resolution, plays that do not immediately meet these criteria remain in the workshop. As a result, pieces that are either more subtle or more avant-garde (or, more “downtown”), do not stand a chance.

Because there is a horizon of expectations vis-à-vis what Meyer believes the audience will want (i.e., “motivated,” objective-driven, psychological realism), the workshops are geared toward creating work with a dramatic bite, fitting into the familiar structure advocated by George Pierce Baker, New Dramatists, and the Actors Studio. What makes it different, however, is that the plays are actually geared toward production. Most plays developed with the workshops at

Axial will be produced. What that means is that if a playwright is committed to attending the workshop Sundays, developing their plays, and giving commentary on other plays, that commitment will generally lead to production. What is problematic with this model is that playwrights in the workshop are all vying for the same production slots, and are therefore in competition with one another which can damage the company's community-building efforts.

Nonetheless, Axial has achieved its goal of having a dialogic relation to the community by presenting works that are under professional contract, and that are of quality – an arbitrary term, perhaps, but as local critic Bob Heisler indicates in his review of The Axial's production of *Two Hearts: Chance Encounters and Unlikely Connections* (the review which led to the company's eviction on Wheeler Street):

When you find a playwright who speaks your language, rush to her, even if it means climbing the steep stairs to a third-floor studio theater in Pleasantville. In Axial Theatre's latest creation, "*Two Hearts: Chance Encounters and Unlikely Connections*," Linda Giuliano proves herself an authentic New York theater voice. Make that an authentic New York cacophony of voices. The result is a thoughtful and emotionally engaging evening of new theater. You'll see yourself, or a friend or an ex-friend on stage, and you'll be talking about the four vignettes long after you climb back down onto Wheeler Avenue. (Heisler)

New York City is still the barometer for legitimate theatre as suggested by the phrase "authentic New York theatre voice" (Heisler). Heisler implies that Broadway is still *the* American theatre, which echoes Loewith's view of Broadway theatre in relation to regional theatre, and the National New Play Network. For Loewith, the regional theatre operates to get the attention of New York. For Heisler, Axial *is* New York theatre due to the power of Giuliano's writing. In short, what Heisler suggests is that the play captures the "authentic" voice of the Broadway play, while presenting the work in (local, easy-to-get-to) "Wheeler Avenue" (Heisler). Because the production of *Two Hearts* was local and authentic (a better word for Heisler might be

“professional” in terms of aesthetic and artistic commitment), it stands out as an example of the ideal community-oriented-performance.

In November, 2010, I attended The Axial’s production of Howard Meyer’s *Welcome: This is a Neighborhood Watch Community*, directed by Joshua Hecht. After the play, I was invited to sit with Axial’s playwrights during their bi-weekly meetings. In the next section, I am going to look at the production and reception of Meyer’s play. I will consider the use of space, the “style” of the play, and the nature of those involved (i.e., which artistic members are “visible,” etc.). I will also consider the role of the community in the production, and how the new play strengthens the bond between The Axial and the town of Pleasantville. I will then consider the nature of the Playreading Series, stressing both how it is successful and how it falls into the trap laid out by the Actors Studio’s Playwrights/Directors Unit. I will then end with a consideration of the function of the playwright in the Small Professional Theatre, highlighting again how this “do-it-yourself” model succeeds where the larger regional theatres do not, not just for the playwright, but for the community he or she serves.

### Neighborhood/Community

As suggested throughout the chapter, the “do-it-yourself” Small Professional Theatre model can fill the vacancy left by the larger LORT theatres: with the SPT, the playwright can function within a theatre company and gain a production, and the theatre company can gain the support and trust of the community by actively engaging community members (community actors teamed with professional actors, educational outreach, etc.). In this section, I am going to make a case-study of the production of Howard Meyer’s play *Welcome: This is a Neighborhood Watch Community*. I will consider the conditions of production, as well as the conditions of



reception. By highlighting the practices of Axial, and the production/reception of the new play, it is my hope that other “do-it-yourself” playwrights can fully understand how the new work can meet the needs of the community, and, if it is a desired goal, gain visibility in national media by working with an eye toward theatre-as-a-local-event.

*Welcome: This is a Neighborhood Community* is an example of American realism. Because the play conforms to the dominant, “good drama” structure, the script-as-written does not operate against the audience’s horizon of expectations, which certainly impacts the community reception of a piece (unlike the early failings of Irving and Blau). I do not wish to suggest that only a realistic play can serve the needs of a community, but rather, it is one that a community may most closely relate to given encounters with other narrative forms (books, television, film, other plays). Further, I argue, theatre companies such as The Axial, which have gained the trust of the community, are now situated to *educate* the community about other performance/aesthetic practices, a point to which I shall return.

Set in a rich Long Island suburb, *Welcome*. . . focuses on a family coming to terms with how they watch one another. A father, concerned that his son’s teacher at a private high school is trying to seduce him, has cameras installed in the teacher’s room. The husband’s friend, through these voyeuristic encounters, learns that his wife has been sleeping with the teacher. The son, meanwhile, expresses feelings of romantic love for his teacher. It’s a tightly-woven story that comes to an ending that never feels forced.

If the play as written is complex, the staging is even more so. The space, again, is the community room in St. John’s Episcopal Church, a gothic-revival church with high-vaulted, gothic (i.e., “pointed”) arches. The back wall, used as one of the performance spaces, has a large stained-glass window, which serves as the living room window. The community room’s kitchen

served as the functional kitchen for the actors. The doors leading to the church sanctuary, behind the audience, served as the door into the teacher, Emerson's, apartment, which was set up with the audience seated three-quarters around the space. The lay-out of the space was so complex, in fact, that audience members were invited to get up and move as the play continued in order to see all of the action. In that way, the audience members were not silent, watching ghosts. Rather, they were fully involved in the lives of these characters, and each setting became much more dynamic as there was a continuous change in focus.

Josh Hecht, who directed this play, currently teaches Devised Drama at The New School for Drama. Hecht has worked throughout the country in regional theatre, Off-Broadway, and at the Lincoln Center. His approach to staging the play is one that removes a sense of relaxation, the "showing" aspect of drama that asks an audience member simply to sit still:

I always feel like I don't want to ignore the moment of being in the theatre watching this thing now. There's something that always feels false to me asking me to ignore the moments I'm actually in. So I feel like removing false walls from the church, and staging the play in the room that we are in, I think that really makes the whole experience much more immediate and much more present tense. (Hecht)

By inhabiting the space, that is, by moving, by not being in a fixed position, audience members are forced to engage with the world of story. Although audience members are not directly addressed, there is still a sense that there is more work to do, in terms of both physically moving and critically engaging with the unmasking process (or, to echo the title, by *actively watching*). This kind of engagement should not be mistaken for the engagement with a community-based-performance in which, as Bruce McConachie has argued, "audience members are induced to turn their imaginations to the ethical relations that might constitute their local, face-to-face lives" (qtd. Fletcher 200).

American realism certainly acts as *a* representation, but the audience members were not forced to confront images that echoed their own lives. However, by asking audiences to move about the sacred space, they were forced to be physically active spectators, giving them more of a physically exertive experience rather than passive spectatorship. This could be a vital strategy in engaging the audience with new aesthetic practices: that is, if you ask them to move during a performance, how can you build on that for the next production? And the next? As stated earlier, Axial was born out of devised drama practices, which, despite a focus on narrative drama, still haunts the company.

A final point for Axial Theatre is that it has gained exposure through reviews featured in *The New York Times*. Although I hesitate to include this because I am skeptical of the view that a review in *The New York Times* is tantamount to optimal playwright success (second only to a production on Broadway), the review exists, and so it must be addressed. Is the review from *The New York Times* really essential? After all, *The Journal News* (distributed in Westchester, Putnam, and Rockland Counties) has published a number of reviews praising Axial, as indicated earlier. There is a larger question to be asked vis-à-vis which critic/publication is more “important” to a theatre company wishing to maintain community trust. Put another way, could the “do-it-yourself” model of new play development and production which situates itself as a community-*in*-community still be in good standing if it did not gain mainstream attention? While I am not entirely sold that a review from *NYT* is the most important step for The Axial (and if it were, why would they continue after they got one?), I cannot avoid the fact that the review does, for better or worse, lend cultural caché to a production and the immediate community.

The key points that should be taken from this example are that the play was developed via a workshop process (Playreading Series), with readings before the public (at the Hudson

Valley Writer's Center); it was produced; it featured both union and non-union actors; it featured the direction of an established theatre artist; and it was performed in a church community room, a non-theatre/theatrical venue. In short, the playwright-led theatre company and community work together as integral parts of the larger production apparatus. The community responded to the suggestion that they move during the performance because there is already a *trust* that exists between community members and the theatre company. This *trust* is the missing element between the regional theatre, and the regional theatre's immediate community.

## CONCLUSIONS ON THE AXIAL AND THE COMMUNITY

Throughout the chapter, I have championed the “do-it-yourself” methodology of Axial Theatre. Though there is flexibility in season-planning, especially since Axial now has a home-base, I would suggest that Axial could benefit by offering more to the community vis-à-vis experimental performance, or works grounded in avant-garde practices. The direction of *Welcome...* suggests that Axial could explore different aesthetics with the audience, as audiences were actively engaged with this production.

Despite this reservation, I would suggest that the Axial Theatre model, the community-oriented-theatre, has much to offer the American Theatre. First of all, there is an understanding of how the theatre can operate as an oscillation between “community” and “professional” theatre, by incorporating professional actors and community actors, and calcified by gaining community trust. Furthermore, the professional actors, such as David Deblinger, offered workshops (for a fee) to community members, while working (at a discount) with Axial theatre members. This creates a teacher/mentor relationship that is fully realized on stage between the union and non-union actors.

Finally, Axial Theatre *produces* original work *developed* in their workshops. While the aesthetic of the Axial is geared toward American realism (“good drama”), it nevertheless succeeds in creating strong communities: the first, the company itself, and the second, the company *within* the community at large. By embracing a community-oriented, “do-it-yourself” model, The Axial thinks *theatrically* and performs *locally*, earning them notice (whether that should be the end result or not) in the professional world.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### BEYOND A HORIZON OF EXPECTATIONS/ QUALITY CONTROL?

It's actually worth it--the song existing at all, I mean--to have something this epic come from it.

–Gregg Bray (Lecturer of Communication and Media at SUNY New Paltz), discussing the Stephen Colbert/Jimmy Fallon cover of Rebecca Black's internet hit, "Friday"

## SUCCESS

The American theatre is a local phenomenon, which can be (and *should* be) entirely artist-driven. With the playwright at the helm as artistic director/producer, perhaps theatre could, in a more valuable way, be considered in a national conversation with other mediated arts, but without the economic discourse that asks theatre to prove its relevancy. This new little theatre movement would keep theatre in constant dialogue with the community, which will build a relationship of mutual support and create a local context for emerging theatre artists. How can a small, local theatre (and the local playwright) measure success?

Indeed, until the regional theatre, success had been measured by Broadway productions. As Jeffrey Ullom notes when discussing the legacy of Jon Jory at the Actors Theatre of Louisville:

[Jory's] dogged determination to maintain the visibility of his festival helped playwrights by altering the perception of success. By no longer needing to go to New York for validation as a writer, the [Humana] festival changed the perception of what a successful playwright could be. (163)

For Ullom, Jory and the Humana Festival changed the idea of success to include the professional regional theatre. Previously, success had been measured vis-à-vis Broadway production. As I have suggested, many playwrights have already started forming their own companies to obviate the insularity of the regional theatre, even though a number of these organizations, such as The

Workhaus in Minneapolis, have achieved mainstream notice and productions (the Workhaus is now in residence at the Guthrie Theatre). Other organizations, such as Playwrights' Commons in Boston, offer workshops geared toward the writer, as well as residencies which bring playwrights, directors, actors and designers together, who are then "tasked with brainstorming and writing/designing/devising theatrical projects that would have been impossible to conceive of as individual artists" ("The Freedom Art Theatre Retreat for Emerging Boston Artists"). Playwrights' Commons provides local artists with the ability to think theatrically, and create their own theatre.

While self-productions had been viewed as "vanity productions" during the latter twentieth century, there comes a point, as I have argued, when a playwright has to take control of the means of production in order to make sure his-or-her work is fully realized, or, in the case of the New York Writers' Bloc, to make sure that he or she can achieve artistic integrity through the communal act of theatre games (via the playwriting workshop geared to the writer). Because of the rise of playwright-led theatre organizations, the term "vanity" has slowly been pulled out of the discourse of American theatre production; however, is there any merit in that pejorative term?

In the last few pages of this study, I want to consider the limits of the "do-it-yourself" model. While I have championed this model as one that could both foreground the playwright function and also answer the needs of local theatres and their communities, I do want to step back and question how we can determine individual and/or community success, as well as the issue of quality control. Put another way, just because a play is written does not mean the play should be produced. In a sense, the argument that some plays and playwrights are more deserving than others is the kind of rhetoric that has allowed the regional theatre to become

insular, where the term “quality” is equated with “visibility,” which, as I argued above, means having prior access to the regional circuit via an MFA from an Ivy-League institution or having friends who are literary managers at top regional organizations. However, as I suggested in the introduction, I am advocating just a “touch” of anarchy, not the overthrow of the entire American theatre industry. The “do-it-yourself” model is an alternative to the process-as-product programs which do not serve the needs of the writer or the play, and which ultimately pay lip-service to the local community in the name of appearing more grant friendly.

## THE PLAYWRIGHT IN CONVERSATION

On September 27, 2005, Keith Urban, a director and playwright, moderated a discussion which looked at the ways in which the “historic avant-garde, The Language Playwrights of the 1970’s and 80’s (Mac Wellman, Jeffrey Jones, Len Jenkin) and the classics influence contemporary playwriting” (11). The panelists included Anne Washburn (13P), Jason Grote (co-chair of the SoHo Rep. writers and directors lab), and Caridad Svich (Resident Writer at New Dramatists, and the author of scholarly publications dealing with the work of Maria Irene Fornes). Again, I recognize that identifying their ties suggests that I am in danger of privileging the status quo by linking writers and affiliations; however, as I have suggested, to not discuss artists’ ties operates as a way of “masking” them (which the authors of *Outrageous Fortune* are certainly guilty of doing). The conversation was published in *PAJ* and given the title “Contemporary American Playwriting: The Issue of Legacy.”

Although a number of discussion topics came up (rather quickly) over the course of the conversation, there are two key points that I wish to highlight here. The first has to do with the self-consciousness of the American playwright. That is, the American playwright is, in many



ways, haunted by the English model of playwriting, and therefore in some regards, sits in the British playwright's shadow. As Svich articulates it:

American theatre, especially for the past 20 years, has been asking itself, "What is American writing?" Originally, American writing was imported. Early American works mainly copied British dramaturgy. Around the 1790s, there was the development of the Yankee character and the beginning of a theatrical vocabulary that was uniquely American. But even so, there has always been a tension between homegrown work and English models of writing. American theatre has a complex that it is not good enough. You can see it in the kind of work that is imported or translated. We have practically no access to the contemporary theatre, for example, of Spain, Argentina, Mexico, or Venezuela. We still are under the burden of the Brits. But the avant-garde helps us ask in its stubbornly resilient way, "Who are we as Americans? What is American theatre?" The foundation of American playwriting is ragtag; it is songs and scenes, sketches and tableaux. How do we take that history and make it speak to an audience? We want an audience to say, "That's mine," to feel they have indeed a sense of ownership about the work as audiences do in other countries. (12)

What Svich highlights is absolutely essential: audiences want to "own," that is, culturally recognize what they see being performed on the stage. At the same time, playwrights want to *own* the right to tell the stories they wish to tell their audiences. "Ownership" relates to both the notions of democracy, as well as the "do-it-yourself" model. To be clear, "owning" a work is not the same as "empathizing" with a work. Empathy is more in accordance with the Greek model of audience catharsis. Rather, ownership is a recognition of an aesthetic that has a component to it which points to a "rag-tag" history, of a plurality of individual voices and ideas, that for a brief moment connects with an audience as a gathering of *individuals*, rather than as a coded "group" with a singular "group mentality" (12). In this regard, the American theatre could well be the "do-it-yourself," because at heart it is about individuals taking charge and seeing theatre as a plurality of voices.

The second point is tied closer to this present study: over the course of the conversation, Grote suggests that the twenty-first century has seen a "general trend to emphasize a 'do-it-

yourself” mentality as opposed to relying on institutions” (Urban 17). This notion of the American playwright/individualist leads to a confirmation of “do-it-yourself,” since you don’t rely on groups or outside institutions. Indeed, taking the current pulse in the Off-Off Broadway community, Grote argues:

We have this sea of well-educated theatre artists, either coming out of MFA programs or not, and at the same time, there is an institutional crisis. But rather than wait around for institutions to recognize us, we find ways to make the work. It is not a deliberate rejection of institutions, but a realization that we cannot rely on them. We have to create our own opportunities. (17)

Because playwrights are creating their own opportunities alongside other theatre practitioners and students, they are creating their own success. I do want to caution that this is not the “individual” success that would fit the mythos of the American dream. In some measure, the rhetoric of “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” fits into the larger frame of a neoliberal world economy, where it’s every person for him- or herself, or that each individual has to create his or her own success; however, with the “do-it-yourself” model, the self operates within the structures of community, and in order for the self to be successful (artistically or otherwise), the community must be successful as well (in terms of artistic conversation, education, the ways in which the theatre companies address their needs, etc.). As William Demastes articulates:

When Aristotle famously observed that humans are political animals, he was observing that humans are by nature social creatures. We aren’t programmed to live or work in isolation, but rather need to live together in a community. [...] If Aristotle was right, then the city of the community is where we belong, and the more entwined we are with our fellow citizens, the better it will be for the health of everyone. [...] Unfortunately, this is exactly what our modern culture endorses, encouraging us all to stand “free,” unencumbered, and on our own two feet. If the Greeks were right, this pursuit of independent living explains exactly why we find ourselves so discontented in this modern world of plenty. Simply put, we’re applying all our energy and resources to pursuing the wrong thing: independence. (*Spalding Gray’s America* 81)

What Demastes offers highlights an inherent problem with the “do-it-yourself” model: how can one achieve independence as a writer while still being invested and connected to community? How can the self relate to both the artistic community, and the surrounding community it claims to support? How can one prevent the “do-it-yourself” model from becoming a kind of libertarian/prosperity gospel model, where everyone has to take personal responsibility for success (which includes retirement funds), and equal (if not more) responsibility for economic failure?

I believe these are the murky waters that the playwright/producer has to chart in order to gain both access into and trust from the local community. Because each community is different, I am not sure that one model can be used to speak for every need, the way in which not every play can serve the need of every audience (another way in which the insular regional theatre model has failed). However, I believe the relationship between the artist(s) and community is symbiotic. To some extent, each model will go through a period of trial-and-error; I can only suggest that the playwright and fellow theatre artists “build it,” and see if “they will come.”

#### ARTISTIC FULFILLMENT, OR “WHOSE HAPPINESS MATTERS?”

The horizon of artistic satisfaction has narrowed via expectations of commercial success (meaning, an LORT, Off-Broadway, and/or Broadway production). As argued in chapter three, “Developmental Hell” operates under the rhetoric of maximum exposure, meaning that a play will be viewed (tested) by a number of audiences before being produced, ensuring economic viability and critical success. However, economic viability and critical success are not only uncertain (as demonstrated by the development and production of *The Cherry Sisters Revisited*), they are not equivalent with the notion of artistic fulfillment. A current case-in-point is Disney’s

Broadway production of *Spider-Man: Turn off the Dark*, directed by Julie Taymor with songs and music by the popular Irish band U2. The opening night has been pushed back five times, and the various injuries and mechanical difficulties that have occurred with the production have become fodder for critics and pundits. In a shocking move, a number of major publications reviewed the show prior to its official opening (now slated for June 14, 2011, after 180 preview performances, “the most in history” (Healy)). In his review for *The New York Times*, Ben Brantley writes:

This production should play up regularly and resonantly the promise that things could go wrong. Because only when things go wrong in this production does it feel remotely right — if, by right, one means entertaining. So keep the fear factor an active part of the show, guys, and stock the Foxwoods gift shops with souvenir crash helmets and T-shirts that say “I saw ‘Spider-Man’ and lived.” Otherwise, a more appropriate slogan would be “I saw ‘Spider-Man’ and slept.” (Brantley)

Brantley concludes, “‘Spider-Man’ is not only the most expensive musical ever to hit Broadway; it may also rank among the worst” (Brantley). The review is pretty damning (and hilarious). How can a Broadway show – the most expensive ever mounted (sixty-five million dollars) – be so poorly produced and received? Julie Taymor is no longer at the director’s helm due to its terrible reviews and seemingly never-ending previews.

Bono of U2 has agreed with the *New York Times* review. In an interview with ABC news, Bono said the negative review “might have been a little hard for some other people around here to take that, but we don’t disagree with the *New York Times*. That’s the sort of stuff we were saying backstage” (“Bono Agrees”). In other words, *Spider-Man* has not provided Bono or others involved with the project a sense of artistic success, even though the gossip surrounding the show has led to sold-out houses. *Spider-Man*, due to the word-of-mouth of the various disasters surrounding the mounting of the production, is destined to be a commercial success, even though it is a critical and artistic failure.

If a Broadway production is not tantamount to artistic fulfillment, what is? If we can broaden the horizons of artistic success to include a *satisfying* production at a Broadway theatre, a LORT Theatre, a Small Professional Theatre, a community theatre, a high school theatre, a college theatre, or, a workshop with a theatre company or a reading in a living room with friends and colleagues, perhaps the theatre will truly become decentralized, and the false binary of amateur/professional will be dissolved (after all, if “amateur” can be defined as “lover of,” then aren’t even professionals in a sense amateurs?). However, a question that needs to be asked is this: whose satisfaction matters? Is it the satisfaction of the playwright? The actor? The audience? The community-at-large?

For example, a key problem with the SPT contract (as used by the Axial Theatre and championed in chapter six) concerns the pay-rate for actors. An actor cannot make a living off of the SPT contract, the way the actor can make a living off of LORT productions. Is the actor sacrificing his or her financial satisfaction in order to take part in playwright-driven work? While it is true that actors cannot make a living with the SPT and Equity Showcase Contracts, it can be assumed that AEA understands that there are times when an actor will not be working on a LORT or Broadway production. The SPT and Equity Showcase contracts exist in order to give actors an opportunity to continue working in between professional projects. While this rhetoric is alarming and continues to play into the professional/amateur binary, it may be a case that the playwright needs to work *with* this rhetoric in order to ensure that his-or-her work receives an industry nod (if that is the goal) or the satisfaction of having professional actors in his or her piece (if that is the goal). In some respects, this discussion regarding the limitations of AEA contracts may signal that it is time for AEA to consider a re-evaluation of their various contracts

in order to include the small, local models (right now the Basic Showcase contract is only available in New York City). This is a point that warrants further evaluation.

What about actor-led production companies? Are they less viable than playwright-driven companies? Consider Tyrone Guthrie who spearheaded the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. Has he not already performed the task of creating an artist-driven theatre? On one hand, yes, there are theatres that have been created by actors and directors (and this can be traced throughout theatre history). On the other hand, what is their commitment to new plays? What is their commitment to the emerging American playwright? How can the playwright be assured of his or her place in the American theatre when most artist-driven theatres are not necessarily looking for the new play, but the opportunity to work with an established text? Therefore, playwright-centered companies are crucial in order to push against the current institutional operations that shape the aesthetic of the American drama, and diminish the playwright function.

The idea of “artistic success” is incredibly amorphous and subjective. Indeed, over the years there have been a number of approaches to identifying the artistic success of a given work. A.W. Eaton has viewed the historic territory of artistic success as being tied in with ethics. For David Hume, for example, artistic success is directly tied in with audience response and empathy, as “the relationship between ethical defects and artistic value frames things in terms of conditions rather than in terms of mere interface. A work’s artistic success can depend upon the audience’s agreement with its ethical orientation, and failure to meet this condition can impede the response required for artistic success” (175). Eaton tends to find Hume’s account of artistic success reasonable, arguing:

[...] works can have a variety of merits and defects that we must balance and weigh against one another when judging the work as a whole. In some works an

ethical flaw of the sort at issue here might be peripheral to the work's overall aims and thus outweighed by meritorious features that remain untouched by the defect. (176)

A work, taken as a whole including its defects and merits (by whatever criteria these two equally amorphous terms can be judged), can be artistically successful when agreed upon by an audience (those who are meant to receive the work) and the creator of the work (playwright). In short, artistic fulfillment can be achieved in the balancing act between the playwright and the playwright's *intended* audience. While one could argue that the theatre artist's notion of success is the most important, I would direct the naysayer's attention to the earlier example of Herbert Blau and Jules Irving during the early days of The Actor's Workshop, which not only failed to take the audience into account, but lambasted them after their works were not well received. The reaction against the community by Blau and Irving does not suggest artistic fulfillment, but rather an artistic misunderstanding. In other words, if Blau and Irving spent time rejecting their audience, can that hostility be a symptom of artistic fulfillment on the part of the artists, without the approval of the audience? I would argue that this is probably not the case, as an artist *needs* healthy dialogue with the community, even if the artist is pushing against the community's horizon of expectations. The artist has a responsibility to engage with his or her community, and this engagement is a key ingredient to artistic fulfillment. Or, as Eaton suggests:

In those cases in which it has been established that a work's artistic success indeed depends upon ethically defective responses from the audience, this will present an obstacle to that success. Such a work contains the seeds of its own artistic failure. (178)

While Eaton is writing about a specific work of art, I am more interested in the conditions of reception for a work of art. Rather than negotiate what is or what isn't "ethically defective," an artist should present a work with an understanding of how an audience may react to the work, and taking responsibility for those reactions (good, bad, or otherwise). A playwright should

consider the conditions for reception, where a work is staged or read, the role of the audience, and the audience's expectations for the theatre (which changes from community to community). Not only will keeping the audience in mind aid the playwright with the notion of artistic success or artistic fulfillment, but it may also help with quality control. I am using the phrase "quality control" to suggest that even though a play has been written, it does not necessarily deserve to be produced and/or published.

### QUALITY CONTROL: THE BIGGER PICTURE

In April of 2011, I was introduced to Rebecca Black's "Friday," a video-gone-viral (spread from peer-to-peer) that has stirred up an incredible amount of controversy. For those who are not familiar with "Friday," it looks like any other tween-video: a thirteen-year-old girl sings with joy about her hopes for a fun weekend. Black's video has created quite a stir in the music world: blogs, internet-news stories, and even *Time* have thrown in their two cents. In short, the findings are that the song and the video are terrible in every way: the lyrics are banal, Black's singing is atrocious (and obviously auto-tuned), and the video is completely *literal*; that is, she is actually *doing* what she is *singing* about.

The song has become so infamous, in fact, that Steven Colbert, Jimmy Fallon, and former American-Idol winner Taylor Hicks performed it, accompanied by The Roots, on Fallon's *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*. Why is the song so hated in the industry? For Rebecca Gibson, writing for *Time*, it is the lyrics that stand as the hallmark of a new generation's inability to actually write a song:

For starters, there's the opening verse, which is just a straight up narration of what Rebecca's morning routine consists of ("Gotta get down to the bus stop/ Gotta catch my bus/ I see my friends"). Then there's Rebecca's apparent obsession with



choosing a spot in the car, which also adds the song's riveting central conflict ("Kicking in the front seat/Sitting in the back seat/ Gotta make my mind up/ Which seat can I take?"). But the song's lowest point (albeit its most hilarious) is when Rebecca literally just sings the days of the week ("Tomorrow is Saturday/ And Sunday comes afterwards"). (Gibson)

Hilton Hater of *The Hollywood Gossip* (online) takes this one step further, suggesting that not only is the song bad, but it is the "worst song in recorded history":

It's racked up over five million YouTube hits, despite a lack of impressive vocals, an unknown singer behind autotuned lyrics, a video that makes no sense (why is Black waiting at a bus stop if her friends are picking her up?!?) and words that include how Friday is a great day and how "partying" is "fun, fun, fun." (Hater)

Perhaps the most compelling reason for its notoriety is due to the surrounding legal issues.

According to Aaron Moss at *The Hollywood Reporter* online:

Last fall, Black was an ordinary kid from Orange County when a friend introduced her to Ark Music Factory, an L.A.-based production company. Black's mother, Georgina Kelly, reportedly paid the company \$4,000 to record the song and produce the accompanying video for "Friday," a song pre-written by Ark founders Patrice Wilson and Clarence Jey. According to Wilson, Kelly's payment covered only a fraction of the production costs for the song and video, which was shot at Black's father's house in January, and featured Black's family and friends as extras. When the video was finished, Black posted it on YouTube, not expecting it to be seen by many people. And it wasn't, until early March, when it appeared on comedian Daniel Tosh's *Tosh.0* blog, in a post entitled "Songwriting Isn't For Everyone." (Moss)

After the appearance of "Friday" on Tosh's blog, the song, and Black, became internet sensations, even to the point that Black was hand-picked by Ryan Seacrest as the "orange carpet" correspondent for the Nickelodeon Kid's Choice Awards (Moss). While the rest of Moss's article considers the lawsuit between Ark Music Factory and Black's mother (who is claiming copyright for the song, as well suing for the use of Black's likeness without permission), what interested me in relation to my study of the "do-it-yourself" model is the way the industry reacted against a teenage girl (and her mother) who dared to choose a path to fame outside of the

structured conventions of Hollywood, television, and music. That is, by “doing it herself,” Black has become notorious.

Black is not the only one seeking alternative methods to introduce her work to the public. Cult filmmaker Kevin Smith, who has had success with *Clerks*, *Mall Rats*, *Chasing Amy*, and *Dogma* is now touring his new film *Red State*, as a means of “self distribution” (Gibron). According to Bill Gibron of the blog *PopMatters*, Smith is self-distributing as a kind of “road-show,” bringing his movie from-theatre-to-theatre as a means of promotion (Gibron). Smith’s move to a self-distribution model is in reaction to the low critical reviews of his last two movies, which he believes resulted in low box-office returns:

Make no mistake – this is a gamble for Smith. As an agitator, he is taking an “I know better stance” that could easily blow up in his face. Currently, the tour is geared almost exclusive to big cities (Boston, Chicago) and well known support sites (New Orleans, Austin, Texas). No, Smith isn’t planning on playing Peoria, one of the old road-showman’s standards for crossover appeal (it’s where the gore epic *Blood Feast* got its start) and such a strategy suggests that the filmmaker knows the best avenues to employ his glorified gimmick. While it’s not new to the artform, Smith’s desire to roadshow *Red State* is certainly unusual for 2011. With all the other avenues for distribution out there, hitting the highway may not be about money, but meaning - something he could certainly use right about now. (Gibron)

For Smith, the self-distribution road is a quest to find artistic meaning. For Black, the “do-it-yourself” (with an outside-the-mainstream organization, Ark Music Factory) model was the key to earn visibility (really, fame) akin to other young “tween” stars (Justin Bieber comes to mind). Are there similar examples in the theatre?

As I have suggested, organizations such as 13P, the New York Writers’ Bloc, and Axial Theatre operate outside of mainstream success. However, some members of these organizations have used the “do-it-yourself” model to gain access to the mainstream. Others have not. Although I have championed the “do-it-yourself” model for playwrights to gain a sense of value

(whether that value is in the artistic joy of workshop community, a production, or access to the larger American theatre structures), what are the dangers of operating a company without some kind of standard (industry or otherwise)? Where can we find an element that acts as a “quality control?” Should there even be something that measures “quality control?”

In the case of Rebecca Black, I confess, I am not sure what the industry standard actually is, or how it operates. Having listened to Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift as a way of gauging young teen popular tastes, I honestly do not see much of a difference between their music and Black’s. I am sure “tweens” will disagree. I do still believe that some (perhaps not all) of the backlash against her comes from the sense that she is an unknown, and has not moved through the proper channels: in other words, “Friday” is a vanity production.

Kevin Smith, on the other hand, has been a kind of cult hero for Generation X. As a member of this generation, and as an avid comic-book reader (Smith has worked on a number of titles, including *The Green Arrow* and *The Green Hornet*) who has visited Smith’s shop in Red Oaks, New Jersey, I feel more sympathetic to Smith. In interviews, he comes off as very approachable, and very funny. While I don’t particularly care for his movies, for some reason, I care for *him*. Perhaps, for me he represents Generation-X: lost in the shuffle, trying to prove that his voice matters, and hopefully, with his touring circuit, he will find the community (or communities) of people that can give him a sense of value; that is, his work (and his travels) will hopefully prove not to be for naught.

In the playwriting world, there is a large debate about the nature of *self-publication* (not just self-production), or pushing one’s plays onto the web. Responding to the new wave of publishing on the web, through either *LuLu*, *Production Scripts*, or through personal websites, Jason Aaron Goldberg, the editor and head publisher at Original Works Publishing, asks,

“whatever happened to the honor of being published? With all this self publishing we've lost sight of that” (*playwrightsbinge*). Goldberg also makes another strong point:

By diluting the quality of the material being published even further we continue to hurt and hinder the truly strong playwrights from being read and produced on a regular basis. Just because you wrote a play doesn't mean it should be produced, and certainly doesn't mean it should be published. (*playwrightsbinge*)

In short, how can a playwright assume an entrepreneurial role, as a means of operating against the insular professional theatre (whether the goal is access into it or otherwise), and still manage some sense of quality control? Can there be a standard (or standards)?

At the Self-Production Panel with The Dramatists Guild, Ric Orloff suggested that playwrights need to produce with “an audience in mind” (Orloff). To paraphrase, if a playwright is going to self-produce, he or she must know the audience for which he or she is producing/writing – whom do you intend to reach with your production? Why should this specific audience see your play? What will they gain? What dialogue will they participate in (through the act of theatre), and how will that add value (in the broadest sense) to their existence? A play is a writer’s letter to the world (as was suggested to me during my years at The New School); Orloff asks us, which members of the world are we trying to reach? For a playwright to select an audience to whom to write his or her letter involves excluding some citizens of the world, as the answer “a general audience” is never satisfactory. In other words, Orloff asks writers to consider audiences-as-communities. There is a tremendous amount of responsibility when writing for (or with) a specific community. Quality control can be measured by how successful the writer is with engaging in a healthy (not necessarily easy) dialogue with the community-at-large.

In closing, the playwright function has a responsibility to the American theatre and to the community that it serves. At the same time, the American theatre has a responsibility to the

playwright function. The playwright creates a code-book for behavior that communicates an idea to a community. The directors, actors and designers should work in healthy collaboration with the writer to make sure that the idea is effectively communicated, and that a dialogue with the community is not just created but continued through productions, educational outreach, and even the occasional talk-back. While these are the kinds of catch-phrases that the regional theatre uses in order to appear more grant-friendly, I am asking playwright-led companies to build their relationships without the aid of non-artist administrators. By doing it ourselves, the new little theatre movement will keep our art alive and offer us the opportunities to experience multiple definitions of success.

## CONCLUSIONS FOR THE PLAYWRIGHT CONVERSATION AND QUALITY CONTROL

What I have attempted to champion in this work is a move away from the workshop model and new play development in regional theatre. What has occurred is an institutional malaise via the rise of developmental programs; that is, plays have become aesthetically uninteresting, dialogue has become stagnant, and the playwright function has been emptied of its agency and relevance due to the rise of a professional network of theatres, and the memetic replication of a workshop model in which only one type of play is truly championed: the “work of quality,” the “good drama.” As various groups are starting to form that situate the playwright at the center, either through the creation of a workshop model that includes the vocabulary of the actor and director, or via the proliferation of local production companies built by-and-for playwrights, theatre has the opportunity to become vibrant, plural, and artistically successful.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that the United States does not have a national theatre. However, what if the United States actually *does* have a national theatre? Can it be that

our national theatre consists of a variety of local models (such as 13P in New York City, Axial Theatre in Pleasantville, and many others not discussed here) rather than one, totalizing theatre organization? Perhaps, the mission of the small, local models (or, the playwright-driven little theatre movement) should be this: to create a national theatre which consists of different voices, working with different communities, across the United States. No two systems of theatre would look alike, and that is how it should be. What is happening in Lafayette, Louisiana should not replicate what is happening Off-Off Broadway; what is happening Off-Off Broadway should not replicate what is happening in Ellenville, New York. Every theatre is different, and vibrant; and, as theatre adapts to the small, local level, theatricality will once again thrive, and the playwright function will regain national trust and appreciation through local activity.

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## VITA

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